

Linking Women's Leadership to Organizational Effectiveness

A Case Study of 12 Non Profit Organizations in India

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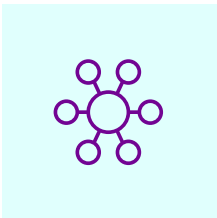
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Table of Contents



The Opportunity

2



The Solution

6



The Impact

19



Challenges, Recommendations and Best Practices

23



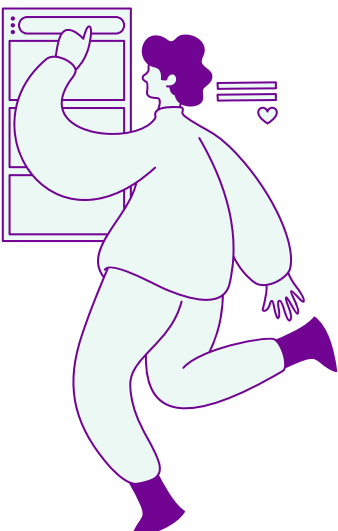
Conclusion

29



Annexure

32



Introduction

Across the social impact sector, women make up the majority of the workforce, yet they remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces. While much has been written about women's journeys to leadership, less attention has been paid to the organizational systems that either enable or constrain these trajectories. We at EquiLead want to address that Gap.



So we set out to ask a fundamental question:

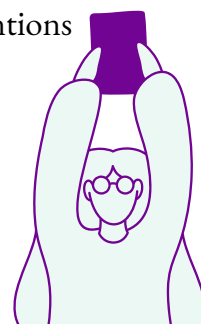
What happens when nonprofit organizations treat women's leadership not as a symbolic goal, but as a strategic business decision?

The answer lies not in isolated success stories but in the systems, structures, and cultural norms that make leadership possible, sustainable, and impactful for women.

Throughout this study, we examined 12 nonprofit organizations that have intentionally designed systemic pillars in various forms to enable women's presence and power in senior leadership and decision-making roles. These pillars include formal policies like codified re-entry pathways, performance appraisal frameworks that reward inclusive leadership, decentralized decision-making models, and intentional mentoring strategies. However, they also encompass informal cultural shifts, such as care-aware planning, collective leadership practices, and solidarity networks that enable women to thrive without having to "lead like men."

Here's what emerged:

Organizations that embed gender equity in their operating DNA, rather than treat it as a standalone project, experience greater strategic alignment, stronger talent retention, deeper community trust, and higher organizational resilience. These are not accidental byproducts. They are the returns on investment from treating inclusion as infrastructure, not an afterthought. They demonstrate that supporting women's leadership is not only a moral imperative but also a lever for long-term organizational effectiveness, credibility, and impact. In spotlighting the experiences of these 12 organizations, this study offers a pathway for how nonprofits can move beyond good intentions to build enabling ecosystems, where women lead while shaping organizations through inclusion and resilience.



The Opportunity

Two decades ago, we started using the phrase “glass ceiling” to describe the invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching top leadership roles. However, as scholars Alice Eagly and Linda Carli argued in 2007, this metaphor no longer captures the full picture. It suggests a single, final barrier at the top, when in reality, women face a series of challenges across every stage of their careers. In addition to that, recent research has highlighted another dynamic: the “glass escalator.” As Clerkin notes in a *Harvard Business Review* article, men in women-dominated fields rise more quickly into positions of leadership and influence. Data from Candid, based on roughly one million nonprofit workers in the US, shows this clearly: although 69% of nonprofit staff identify as women, their share declines at higher levels of authority, dropping to 52% on boards. At the CEO level, women make up 62%, yet men disproportionately head the largest, most resource-rich organizations. Male CEOs, despite being fewer in number, lead nonprofits with almost twice the revenue of those led by women, receive on average 27% higher compensation, and are more likely to preside over boards with male majorities.


Taken together, these dynamics point to a more complex reality — one that Eagly and Carli describe as a ‘labyrinth’. Instead of a straightforward climb, women’s career journeys unfold as winding and uneven pathways, demanding persistence, adaptability, and strategy at every stage. The labyrinth reflects the complex and non-linear journey that women must undertake to reach leadership. The path exists, but it is filled with both expected and unforeseen twists. For instance, women’s annual promotion rates average 5.1%, compared to 5.7% for men. Over time, this gap compounds into significantly slower career advancement (Kunze & Miller, 2024).

Globally, women perform about 2.8 times more unpaid care work than men, averaging 4.1 hours daily versus 1.5 hours for men (OECD, 2014; UN Women, 2023).

This framing of the labyrinth helps us see women’s leadership journeys as shaped not only by individual ability, but by systemic barriers embedded in workplaces, policies, and cultural expectations.

Scholars highlight that addressing these challenges requires more than simply promoting women into senior roles; it requires **changing the systems that define leadership**. Eagly and Carli (2007) emphasize that workplace norms such as long-hours culture, opaque recruitment, and exclusion from operational responsibilities prevent women from building the experience and credibility needed for leadership.

Research also shows that informal networks and social capital shape advancement. Ibarra (1993) demonstrated that women and minorities often lack access to influential professional networks, which restricts visibility and opportunities for leadership. Similarly, Banerjee (2022) argues that in India, gender intersects with caste and class to further compound these exclusions, leaving many women leaders rising despite the system, not because of it. At the same time, evidence suggests that organizations that embed gender equity into their systems reap tangible benefits. Studies show that gender-diverse leadership teams are more likely to challenge group thinking, take latent risks, and drive innovation (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Inclusive workplaces that codify caregiver-friendly policies see up to a 30% reduction in mid-career attrition among high-potential employees (Dasra & Bain, 2019).



The International Labour Organization (2019) similarly finds that businesses with stronger gender diversity in management are more resilient, credible, and competitive.

Taken together, the literature reinforces the central idea of this study: **women's leadership is not sustained by individual determination alone but by ecosystems like policies, practices, and cultural norms which is what makes leadership pathways visible, accessible, and enduring.**

If leadership is structured by systems, then organizations themselves become critical sites of transformation. Leadership does not exist in isolation; it is shaped by the values, policies, and power structures of institutions. Without intentional design, organizations risk reinforcing exclusion through founder-centrism, opaque governance, or network-based access to opportunities that privilege a few. When systems fail, women often advance *despite* the organization rather than because of it, rising through personal resilience, but without the scaffolding that makes such pathways sustainable for others. By contrast, organizations that embed gender equity into their structures create enabling ecosystems in which women's leadership is not exceptional but expected.

There are still limited studies on women's leadership in the Indian nonprofit sector. The sector is often perceived as a space where women are prominent, yet this visibility masks persistent uninclusivity. A survey conducted by Dasra (2015) across 328 nonprofit organizations found that while women make up a significant share of the workforce, their presence in decision-making positions remains disproportionately low.

Two-thirds of organizations reported underrepresentation of women at managerial levels and above, with the gap widening as organizational size increased. For nonprofits with budgets exceeding ₹5 crores, only 20% were led by women compared to 38% led by men.

The survey also revealed that organizational leadership shapes culture: women-led nonprofits were more than five times as likely as men-led ones to have higher female representation in managerial positions, and ten times more likely to have gender-diverse boards.

In 75% of women-led organizations, women made up at least half the workforce, compared to just 15% of men-led organizations. This underscores how women's leadership at the top reverberates throughout the institution, influencing hiring, representation, and organizational priorities.

Globally, efforts to improve organizational capacity on gender and diversity, through training, mentoring, the development of tools, and leadership coaching, have been underway for years (Dawson, 2011). Yet the evidence from India demonstrates that representation alone does not translate into equity at leadership levels. Organizational intent and system design are decisive. Therefore, if the Indian social sector is to advance its mission of equity and justice, nonprofits must focus not only on their external impact but also on building internal structures that enable women to thrive and lead.

This dissonance is not accidental; it is systemic!

In the impact sector, organizational norms often privilege founder-centrism, informal governance and network-based access to opportunities, which are all systems that are difficult to navigate and even harder to challenge without institutional backing. When these are not designed with equity in mind, the result is not only a slower climb but also an invisible filter that holds women back or pushes them out.

This recognition shifts the central question. Rather than only asking what women need to do differently to overcome systemic barriers, the focus must also turn to organizations: What happens when the organization becomes the unit of transformation? How can systems be restructured to enable women to thrive, influence, and reshape leadership?

Our study is grounded in this logic. Instead of concentrating narrowly on “training women” through leadership training or confidence-building programs, it examines the ecosystems that shape leadership outcomes: hiring pipelines, decision-making norms, accountability structures, and the unspoken codes of workplace culture. By analyzing these organizational dynamics, we aim to understand how women’s leadership is enabled, sustained, or obstructed, and what lessons can be drawn from institutions that have built more inclusive pathways. By placing organizations at the center of analysis, this study moves beyond surface-level parity to ask deeper, systemic questions:

- What structural and cultural elements make women’s leadership sustainable?
- How does inclusive leadership influence organizational resilience and talent retention?

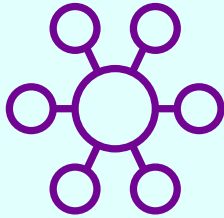
- What ripple effects does women’s leadership have for strategy, governance, and the communities these organizations serve?

By examining how these organizations design pathways, policies, and practices to enable women’s advancement, we seek to understand how women’s leadership contributes to:

- Stronger talent retention and organizational resilience
- More participatory governance and culturally attuned programming
- Enhanced social impact through deeper community trust and alignment.

About the Study

To unpack and understand how women leadership shapes in organizations, we:



Mapped

gender-equity practices across twelve diverse organizations.



Captured

the motivations, strategies, and conditions that make women's leadership possible and sustainable.



Surfaced

persistent gaps, structural barriers, and intersectional exclusions that still hold women back.



Outlined

practical, actionable moves for NGOs, social enterprises, funders, and networks to strengthen women's leadership pipelines.

Throughout, we applied an intersectional lens, recognising that gender interacts with caste, geography, class, ability, and other identity factors, shaping both opportunities and obstacles.



The Solution

This chapter examines how women's leadership is transforming the social sector. Beyond representation, women leaders are redefining how decisions are made, how teams align with values, and how organizations stay connected to the communities they serve. Drawing on insights from twelve organizations, this section unpacks both the forms of leadership observed and the ecosystems that enable them.

2.1 Understanding Women's Leadership

Across the twelve organizations studied, women's leadership was not treated as symbolic. Instead, it was observed as a catalyst for shifting organizational values, strengthening decision-making, and deepening strategic clarity. This section outlines the main leadership types that emerged and the mechanisms through which they contribute to organizational effectiveness.

Theme / Leadership type	How it shows up (structure & practice)	Mechanisms (what it changes inside org)	Outcomes/contribution to success
Inclusive co-leadership	Co-chairs, leadership teams, rotating responsibilities, shared decision forums	Diversifies decision-making, reduces single-point failure, models power-sharing	Faster consensus, better risk-distribution, higher buy-in across teams
Transformative leadership	Leaders' centre lived experience, movement links, and participatory processes	Challenges hierarchy; prioritises care, accountability, and redistribution of power	Increased community relevance, legitimacy, and long-term change orientation
Women's non-hierarchical style (contributor profile)	Empathy-led management, flexible work practices, mentoring, team-first norms	Stronger intra-team trust and emotional safety; focus on work-life balance & relational management	Higher team cohesion, adaptability, improved staff wellbeing & retention
Flatter, non-pyramidal structure	Multiple management levels, decentralized decision rights	Speeds local decision-making; enables collective leadership and second/third-line pathways	Resilience, continuity, better local adaptation, succession readiness
Resource-constrained / early-stage orgs (culture-driven Diversity & Inclusion)	Few formal D&I policies; reliance on leader intent & culture	Informal norms determine inclusion; dependent on leader values and hiring choices	Variable outcomes: can be inclusive if leaders deliberate, or exclusionary if not

These models show that women's leadership is not a single style but a spectrum, ranging from shared decision-making structures to feminist practices rooted in lived experience. What connects them is a consistent move away from hierarchy and towards collaboration, care, and accountability.

1. Leadership Style: Non-Hierarchical & Enabling

It has been observed that women leaders often approach organizational success by centering community and team needs. Their leadership style may lean towards enabling rather than directive, creating space for autonomy, collaboration, and inclusive decision-making. In some contexts, they appear to build strong emotional connections and trust with teams and stakeholders, which can help shift mindsets within and beyond the organization. There are also instances where women leaders encourage team members to take ownership of their own strands of work, potentially multiplying leadership capacity across the organization .

*"There's always more eagerness to listen to women working in the field on women's issues than hearing it from the men, and that has helped because we had a lot of female experts in our team." - **Woman Director at an NPO***

2. Feminism in Action: Proximate & Contextual Leadership

Women's leadership has also been observed to embody feminism in action, with approaches often rooted in lived experience and community contexts. In several cases, women leaders practice proximate, bottom-up decision-making, allowing strategies to emerge from within communities and making them more responsive to local realities. This style of leadership can translate feminist values into everyday practice and, in some contexts, has supported transformational change through solidarity, contextual knowledge, and the empowerment of local women's leadership.

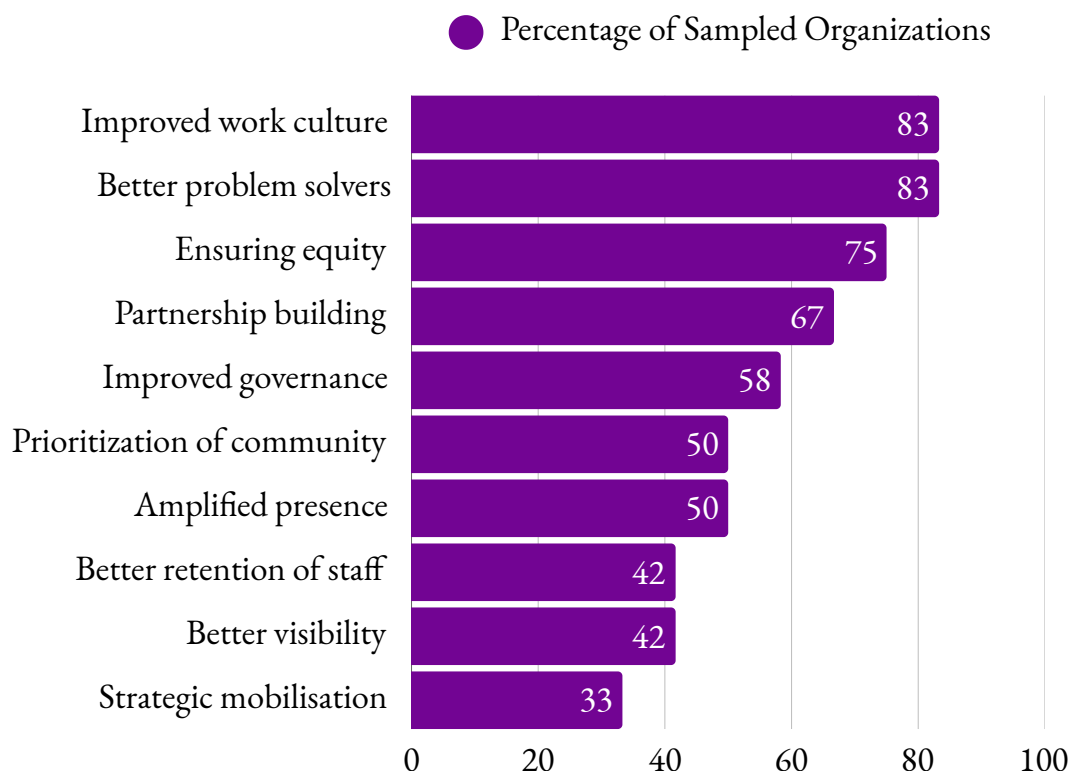
*"There has been historical discrimination when it comes to women and leadership. These are women's spaces, and it is in these spaces that we build women's leadership." - **Woman Director at a NPO***

*Important for a leader to lead by example. For example, I never, in the group meetings, I never talk about achieving targets etc. I only talk about what are the values - **Woman Founder and CEO***

*Diverse opinions come only when we have both men and women sitting on that chair. You're taking decisions, right? So that is very very important - **Woman Head of HR***

*I don't think that having only a woman in a leadership position is enough, it doesn't solve for gender equity, or doesn't create an inclusive workplace. You need an equitable leader - **Woman Director***

Graph 1: How has having more women in leadership roles improved your organisation ?



Organizations shared the following values that women bring to the organizational culture :

Across the 12 organizations, women’s leadership was found to be supported by intentional systems, targeted recruitment, mentoring, flexible policies, and transparent pathways. **9 out of 12 of our surveyed organizations agreed that women in leadership roles have improved the effectiveness in work culture, problem-solving, building resilient teams, and ensuring equity in programming.**



*“I can't imagine my organization without women... Women create a different perspective and bring value to our work. I'm not saying there shouldn't be men, and I think men create, and they do give a different kind of perspective. But I think the work we do requires women more, if not as much as, men in the work that we do.” - **Woman Director***

*“Empathy... is a rare characteristic of any organization. And in organizations where we see more women in leadership, we have always seen a lot of camaraderie among colleagues.” - **Woman Director***

Towards a More Inclusive Conception of Leadership

Women's leadership is increasingly being redefined, challenging stereotypes, resisting narrow corporate metrics, and calling for intersectional approaches. These shifts suggest that leadership in the social sector is evolving as more dynamic, inclusive, and contextually grounded. Three key patterns that stand out here are:

1. Redefining Leadership

Women's leadership is being re-imagined as home-grown, organic, and evolving. While some organizations believed that women leaders need to be promoted as they bring in distinct traits and values to the workplace, a few were also of the view that these qualities of being intuitive, empathetic are actually social constructs and run the risk of typecasting women leaders. Both these point of view lead us to examining not just who leads, but how do they lead and why do they lead.

"I don't want to be a part of a conversation where women are more intuitive and empathetic.. It's such a social construct that we are bringing to the workplace." – Woman CEO & MD

2. Rethinking the Social Sector

Grassroots leaders argue that leadership should not be defined by corporate metrics such as fundraising or marketing. Instead, leadership can be about building inclusive cultures aligned with values and long-term transformation. Feminist leadership is seen as organic, dynamic, and power-sharing, dismantling concentration in individuals.

"Feminist leadership is more organic, dynamic, and that's what I mean by transformative leadership, because it leads to transformation in the organization as well." – Woman Executive Director

3. Intersectionality

Organizations acknowledge intersecting inequalities of caste, class, disability, and region, yet action often remains episodic or tied to program goals. There is recognition of the need to embed intersectionality within workplace practices, though progress has been uneven.

"Hiring somebody with disability means we should also be able to provide them with a safe ecosystem in terms of their well-being." – Woman Head of Programs

Together, these reflections point to a critical insight: leadership is not static but evolving, often in contested and experimental ways. The next section explores how these shifts are being operationalized in practice, looking at the emerging systems, pathways, and organizational choices that make women's leadership possible and sustainable.

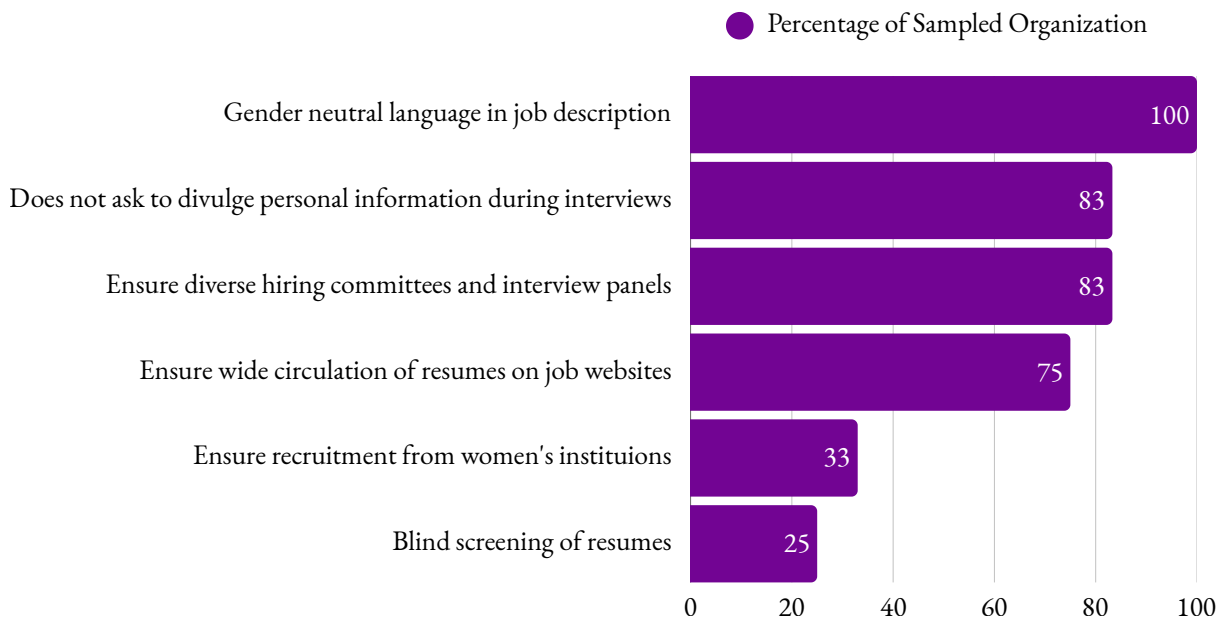
How It Happens: Intentional Pathways to Leadership Equity

None of the organizations we studied reached leadership equity by accident. Each made deliberate choices to design systems, structures, and norms that helped women enter, rise, and thrive in leadership roles. These choices ranged from targeted recruitment and embedded mentorship to care-aware policies and transparent career pathways:

1. Targeted Talent Pipelines

Diversifying leadership requires designing recruitment strategies that deliberately reach beyond traditional talent pools. Recruiting women leaders from Tier 2 and Tier 3 towns brings representation along with embedded credibility, as these leaders already hold trust capital within their communities and understand the nuances of local governance, culture, and needs. This approach not only expands access to leadership but ensures that programs are contextually grounded, culturally resonant, and better positioned for adoption by local stakeholders.

Graph 2: Gender sensitive recruitment practices adopted by organisations



Observed in Practice: Youth4Jobs built a regional leadership strategy to identify and develop women leaders from smaller towns, avoiding the metropolitan bias in leadership selection. Learning from grassroots voices, the organization strengthens representation, builds local credibility, and fosters leadership growth at scale which is an approach especially vital in developing country contexts.

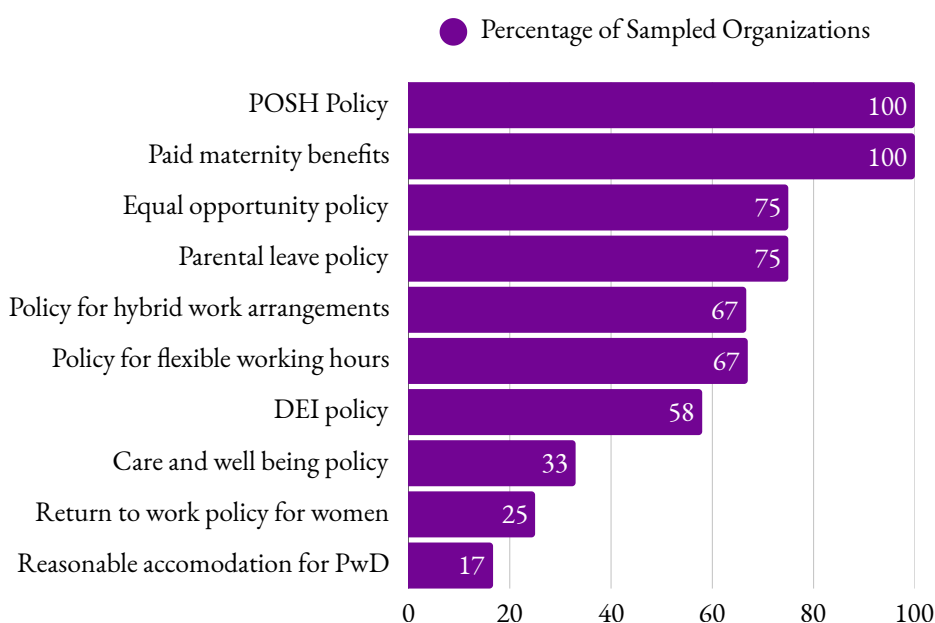
“We have a precedent of having recruited someone who went on maternity leave two months after joining. And we were equipped. But what we find is that pregnant women find it very difficult to get employment. But we have precedence of that as well, not grudging.” - Woman Director

“So, whether it is, you know, individuals from disadvantaged communities, SC, ST, OBC, we’re trying to make a conscious effort, actually, in that direction. In the past, a lot of the community-level leaders have actually been integrated into the organization as full-time employees as well.” - Woman Sr. Advisor, CEO’s office

2. Embedding Inclusion into Systems

Equity sustains when it is hardwired into the organization's operating rhythm, across policies, processes, and performance management, rather than left to intent or goodwill. Organizations that link inclusion to measurable indicators and embed it into day-to-day management remove the risk of equity being applied inconsistently or fading over time. This transforms inclusion from a value statement into an accountability framework that can withstand leadership changes and scale with growth.

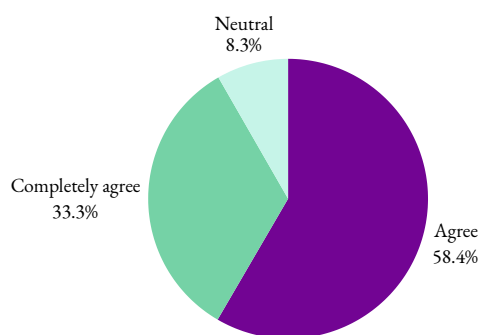
Graph 3: Workplace policy adoption across organizations



Observed in Practice: Asar integrates inclusion into its hybrid team model, pairing flexibility with structured care norms and wellness check-ins, so staff with different infrastructure or caregiving realities are not disadvantaged. **Magic Bus Foundation** operationalizes equity through DEI metrics, fair Career progression decisions, and a gender-neutral performance Management System.

3. Leadership Through Mentorship

Mentorship is most effective when it evolves into sponsorship, where senior leaders not only guide but actively position emerging talent for leadership opportunities. Bringing junior colleagues into decision-making spaces, giving them co-ownership of high-profile work, and ensuring external visibility accelerates readiness and builds credibility. This is particularly important for women in technical or program-focused roles who might otherwise have limited exposure to strategic leadership.



Graph 4: Organisations' response on the relationship between % women in leadership, and the recruitment and retention of women

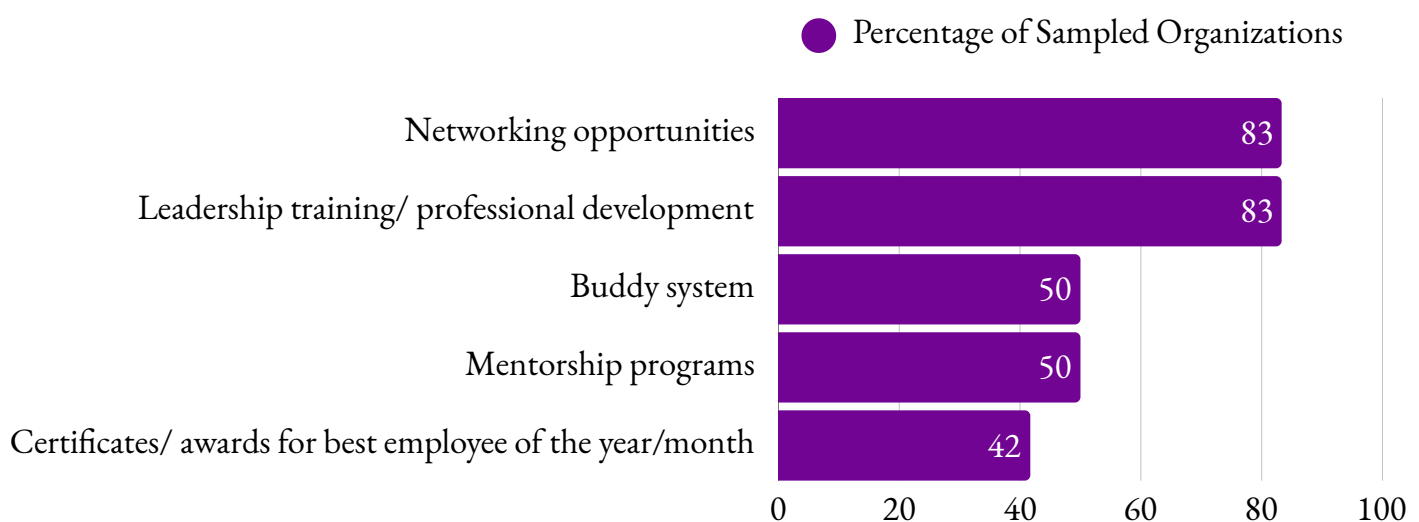
Observed in Practice: At ICRW Asia, senior women leaders treat mentorship as a co-strategy exercise. Emerging leaders are invited to co-author reports, participate in program design, and represent the organization at external forums. This approach fast-tracks both skill-building and recognition, ensuring that leadership readiness is matched with visibility and influence.

4. Clear Progression Pathways

Ambiguity in roles, expectations, and advancement criteria often disadvantages women, especially those re-entering the workforce after caregiving breaks. Codifying career pathways removes subjectivity from promotion decisions, creates transparency, and enables employees to prepare strategically for leadership roles. It also sends a strong cultural signal that advancement is based on merit and clearly defined contributions.

Observed in Practice: The Teacher Foundation and Indus Action have formalized role descriptions and transparent progression frameworks, making leadership opportunities visible and accessible. For women returning after career breaks, these systems alleviate uncertainty, mitigate the risk of being sidelined into less strategic roles, and facilitate smoother reintegration into leadership tracks.

Graph 5: How are organisations supporting women employees in their leadership journeys



Leadership Without a Corner Office

In some of the organizations we studied, leadership was seen not just as a title reserved for a few; it surfaced as a practice woven through teams, geographies, and communities. For instance, organizations such as Utthan, WORD, and FAT dismantle the traditional pyramid, letting leadership emerge from thematic teams, field sites, and learning cohorts. This approach draws women from non-metropolitan backgrounds into decision-making roles where they can lead authentically and sustainably. Intersectionality is not an afterthought; it is the design principle. North East Network puts all women at the center of its field leadership. IWWAGE and Asar ensure that research and programming reflect the voices of those historically excluded from policy discourse.

Here, leadership is not a reward for individual achievement; it is a shared responsibility, embedded in systems that allow many to rise, not just one to shine.

What It Changes: The Ripple Effects of Women's Leadership

- When many women lead, organizations don't just diversify their team rosters; they fundamentally shift how power is held, how policies are designed, and how impact is measured.
- In many cases, performance frameworks evolve to value collaboration, mentorship, and team culture alongside outputs, as seen in Magic Bus Foundation's appraisal reforms and Asar's flexibility and wellbeing practices that reduce burnout and improve retention.
- Career paths become more flexible and inclusive, with organizations like Indus Action, normalizing nonlinear journeys and removing penalties for caregiving breaks.
- WORD's re-entry systems keep experienced leaders in play, while collective leadership approaches create stronger alignment and smoother strategic pivots, whether adapting to hybrid work, expanding into rural areas, or responding to funder shifts.
- In organizations such as IWWAGE, gender is not an afterthought but a core strategic lens, eliminating blind spots and strengthening stakeholder engagement. Most powerfully, women leaders open doors for others, multiplying impact as in FAT, where alumnae return as mentors, or in Utthan, where junior staff lead state-level consultations.

These shifts chip away at the structural and cultural walls of the leadership labyrinth, easing the twists, turns, and dead ends that have historically slowed or blocked women's rise, replacing them with pathways designed for more women to navigate, enter, and thrive in leadership on their terms.



What enables women not just to lead, but to lead sustainably, strategically, and systemically?

A. Structural Enablers: Building the Scaffolding for Leadership

Across the organizations studied, sustained women's leadership was rarely the product of chance. It emerged that organizational architecture, the formal systems, processes, and norms, was intentionally designed to create, recognize, and sustain pathways to the top. These were not symbolic statements of commitment; they were institutional mechanisms that embedded inclusion into hiring, progression, decision-making, and performance evaluation. Four structural levers stood out:

1. Localized Leadership Models: Leadership without Displacement

For many women from smaller towns, rural areas, or marginalized geographies, the requirement to relocate to urban, male-dominated leadership hubs acts as a silent filter, excluding those with deep contextual knowledge. Localized leadership models dismantle this barrier by enabling women to lead where they are rooted, preserving local credibility while enhancing organizational reach.

Observed in practice: Youth4Jobs exemplifies a decentralized leadership model, with women holding state and zonal leadership positions across regions. Rather than concentrating decision-making at a central HQ, the organization invests in local leadership development. This allows women with contextual expertise, often from small towns or Tier 2/3 cities, to step into strategic roles without needing to migrate or assimilate into metropolitan leadership norms.


2. Measurable Inclusion Systems: From Aspiration to Operational Reality

Inclusion becomes durable when it is quantified, monitored, and linked to performance outcomes. Without measurement, equity risks become symbolic or personality-dependent. Measurable systems create data visibility, identify representation gaps, and hold leaders accountable for progress.

Observed in practice: An observed emerging best practice is organisations institutionalising inclusion through a real-time DEI dashboard, enabling visibility across gender, geography, and role levels. This is backed by appraisal systems that embed inclusive leadership behaviours such as collaboration, mentorship, and care-centered team building, as criteria alongside performance metrics.

3. Embedded Mentorship Mechanisms : Accelerating Leadership Readiness

While training builds skills, mentorship accelerates readiness by providing strategic exposure, decision-making experience, and real-time feedback loops. Pairing emerging women leaders with senior colleagues



in strategic, not just supervisory, contexts speeds the transition from technical or programmatic expertise to organizational leadership.

Observed in practice: ICRW Asia leverages its culture of collaboration and reflection to build leadership from within. Senior leaders not only supervise but also co-develop program strategies with emerging leaders. This embedded form of co-learning creates an environment where colleagues have ownership in projects and gain confidence, strengthening the leadership pipeline, particularly for younger women entering the organization with limited exposure to strategy development spaces.

4. Distributed Decision-Making: Broadening

Entry Points for Leadership - Over-reliance on a single leader or centralized decision-making creates bottlenecks and heightens succession risk. Distributed models embed decision-making authority across teams, allowing leadership to emerge organically from multiple points in the organization and maintain operational resilience through transitions.

Observed in practice: WORD ensures that leadership roles are not siloed or personality-driven by anchoring decisions in team clusters and thematic groups. This allows for smoother transitions, distributed accountability, and leadership emergence across levels, including from field teams.

The Takeaway- Systems sustain women's leadership.

The organizations that achieved lasting gender diversity in leadership didn't rely on goodwill or isolated initiatives; they built deliberate frameworks that made leadership accessible, visible, and measurable. Localized leadership models kept talent rooted in their contexts, measurable inclusion systems created accountability, embedded mentorship accelerated readiness, and distributed decision-making broadened entry points. Together, these structures replaced fragile, personality-driven leadership with resilient pipelines that can withstand turnover, scale across geographies, and anchor inclusion into the organization's DNA.

B. Intentionality and Policy: Writing Down What Inclusion Requires

While culture shapes daily experience, formal policies serve as the guardrails for inclusion, ensuring leadership pathways are not left to chance, discretion, or individual goodwill. Codification turns equity into an organizational standard, protecting it through leadership changes, growth, and shifts in context.

1. Reducing Ambiguity for New Hires

For women entering from non-linear career paths or re-entering the workforce after caregiving, ambiguity around role expectations and growth trajectories can create invisible barriers to success. Standardized onboarding, role documentation, and performance criteria help eliminate this uncertainty, ensuring access to leadership pathways is determined by transparent processes rather than informal networks or unwritten norms.

Observed in Practice – The Teacher Foundation introduced standardized onboarding and role documentation processes that reduced ambiguity for new hires. This is particularly important for women joining from non-linear career paths, where unwritten norms often create hidden disadvantages.


2. Rewarding Inclusive Leadership

Leadership assessments that focus exclusively on technical outputs risk overlooking the relational and cultural contributions that often underpin sustainable impact. By integrating inclusive leadership behaviours, such as mentoring, cross-functional collaboration, and fostering team resilience into appraisal frameworks, organizations create multi-dimensional advancement pathways that value a broader set of strengths, making leadership roles more accessible to women from diverse professional journeys.

Observed in Practice – Indus Action applies a DEI-oriented appraisal framework that evaluates leadership through emotional intelligence, mentorship, and contribution to team culture, rather than focusing only on fundraising targets or external visibility. The organization also tracks re-entry and progression pathways, enabling women to return to the workforce after caregiving transitions without facing career penalties for their breaks.

3. Embedding Inclusion in Core Systems

Isolated DEI initiatives often fail to survive leadership changes or funding shifts. When inclusion principles are integrated directly into core HR processes, appraisal systems, and leadership development,



they become part of the organization's institutional DNA. This allows equity goals to be measured, monitored, and reinforced over time, turning them into a continuous improvement process rather than a one-off intervention.

Observed in practice: CSF integrates DEI into HR and appraisal systems, and has begun codifying inclusive practices through internal tools. Leadership development and performance tracking are explicitly tied to values of inclusion, transparency, and strategic alignment

4. Safeguarding Equity Through Mission-Aligned Policies

Policies that are directly anchored to the organization's mission act as resilience mechanisms during growth, restructuring, or external shocks. They ensure that equity is not deprioritized when operational pressures mount and that women's leadership development remains a protected strategic priority.

Observed in Practice: Feminist Approach to Technology and IWWAGE both pointed to the importance of mission-aligned policies such as codified grievance redressal, support for young first-time workers, and flexible mentorship models that allowed women to grow in confidence and voice over time.

Write it down, keep it alive!

Codification is not bureaucracy, it is strategic risk management for equity. By reducing ambiguity, rewarding inclusive behaviours, embedding values into the organizational core, and aligning policies with mission, organizations move beyond good intentions to create leadership pathways that endure, scale, and deliver measurable impact. Codified policies transform equity from an aspiration into a permanent feature of an organization's operating system. By reducing ambiguity, rewarding inclusive behaviours, embedding values into core processes, and safeguarding gains through mission-aligned policies, organizations create leadership pathways that endure through transitions and change.

Before examining the impact of these practices, it is critical to acknowledge the underlying dynamics shaping women's leadership in the sector:



AREAS OF DIVERGENCE

Areas of Divergence remain significant. The term *women's leadership* carries multiple interpretations, and its meaning shifts when examined through a feminist lens. Moreover, the role of intersectionality, how gender, caste, ethnicity, region, and language intersect to enable or obstruct leadership pathways, remains under-recognized and under-measured. These gaps create variation in how organizations design, resource, and sustain leadership pipelines.

It is against this backdrop of both divergence and convergence that we turn to the next section: exploring the tangible internal, sectoral, and social impacts of women's leadership when it is structurally embedded, intentionally supported, and allowed to shape the organization from within.

AREAS OF CONVERGENCE

At the same time, Areas of Convergence are striking. A majority of organizations agree that women in leadership roles strengthen work culture (80%), enhance problem-solving capabilities (80%), and boost overall organizational performance. More than 90% report that women leaders directly contribute to higher recruitment and stronger mentorship of more women. These patterns reinforce the central hypothesis of this study: when women occupy significant leadership positions, organizations are more likely to create environments where women can grow, lead, and thrive, while driving measurable performance gains.



The Impact

What happens when equity is embedded in leadership, not just in program

3.1 Internal Organizational Impact

A. Stronger Talent Retention at the Mid-Career Cliff: Across the sector, the steepest drop-off in women's leadership occurs mid-career, when leadership readiness peaks but caregiving responsibilities also intensify. Most organizations lose talent here. We wanted to examine how organizations in our study coped with this and learnt that they **treated retention as a design problem**, not an HR afterthought. Their solution: normalize career breaks, engineer re-entry as a leadership accelerator, and embed flexibility into core operations so women can remain in strategic roles without compromising personal responsibilities.

Barrier	What Typically Happens	What These Organizations Did Differently	Case Example
Re-entry after caregiving	Informal, ad-hoc placement in low-influence roles	Built formal re-entry pathways with strategic exposure	WORD: One-on-one reintegration plans, adjusted deliverables, and leadership access via grant strategy meetings & community planning sessions
Balancing work and life rhythms	Flexibility is seen as a concession, not a standard	Codified rhythm-based planning into a hybrid work culture	Asar: Women design workweeks around caregiving, menstruation cycles, or mental health needs; flexibility co-planned, not penalized
Perception of career breaks	Viewed as a loss of commitment or capability	Integrated into performance evaluation criteria	Indus Action: Structured onboarding, expectation alignment, peer support; career breaks de-linked from negative performance assumptions

Why This Works:

These organizations reframed the mid-career stage from a point of attrition to a point of investment. Instead of losing seasoned leaders with institutional memory and credibility, they re-engaged them at higher levels of influence. Retention is a strategic lever for leadership strength. By embedding re-entry, flexibility, and perception shifts into organizational DNA, these organizations turned the sector's most vulnerable career stage into a springboard for sustained leadership.

B. Alignment, Organizational Cohesion, and Inclusion in Decision-Making

When women's leadership is embedded into the structure of an organization, alignment stops being an abstract ideal and becomes a lived reality, values flow into strategy, strategy flows into operations, and decision-making draws from the full depth of the team's experience. The effect is twofold: a shared sense of purpose that holds steady through change, and a decision-making culture that anticipates risks and surfaces opportunities others might miss.

Recursive Mentoring

FAT achieves this through a recursive mentoring loop where graduates return as peer mentors, carrying forward feminist ethics, digital autonomy, and solidarity as lived practice. These values don't just survive growth; they scale with it.

Performance Systems

CSF builds teamwork into its performance systems by valuing leaders' ability to mentor, collaborate, and use on-ground insights as much as their program results. This helps the organization grow without losing its core culture.

Geographic Alignment

At **North East Network**, alignment is as much geographic, ethnic and linguistic as it is strategic. Grassroots Women leaders co-creating strategies with field teams so implementation and planning move in lockstep, reducing the friction and mistrust that can slow impact.

C. More Inclusive Decision-Making and Reduced Blind Spots

Indus Action practices making a conscious and safe space for staff with different backgrounds, and creates space for them to share, ensuring the voices in the room have lived experience of the issues they are solving.

Asar turns transparency into a design principle, giving field teams and managers equal access to planning documents and progress reports so accountability is collective; women team leads, especially those balancing caregiving, report feeling more confident to challenge assumptions and flag risks early.

At **Magic Bus Foundation**, multiple forums have been institutionalized to create 'safe spaces' where everyone feels empowered to speak, share feedback, and 'voice' their opinions openly. Leaders actively encourage diverse perspectives through a participative leadership style - ensuring that different viewpoints are heard, respected, and thoughtfully considered. This inclusive approach leads to more balanced, future-ready decision-making that aligns with the organization's overall vision, while strengthening trust, ownership, and collective performance across teams.

Across these organizations, alignment is not enforced from the top but woven through peer relationships, performance systems, local leadership, and shared information flows. Inclusion is not an occasional gesture but a structural habit.

The influence of women's leadership extends well beyond organizational boundaries. When women from within communities step into decision-making roles, they bring with them lived knowledge, cultural fluency, and relational trust that external actors often cannot replicate. This embedded leadership not only strengthens program delivery but also deepens community participation and ownership.

A. Greater Community Trust and Embeddedness

North East Network: Leadership includes women from all identities and diverse communities to design and implement programs in their native languages, often based on oral knowledge systems. This creates a level of community trust that cannot be replicated through external hires. Stakeholders shared that programs led by these women faced **fewer dropouts, stronger grassroots participation, and higher reporting of sensitive issues** like gender-based violence.

FAT's Peer-Mentorship Model: Creates role continuity in hard-to-reach communities. Young girls who were once program beneficiaries now lead sessions, design outreach strategies, and represent the organization in public forums. Because they share the lived realities of their mentees, they can model **aspirational yet achievable leadership**, particularly for girls from Dalit, Muslim, and working-class families.

Utthan's Governance Approach: Community-rooted women move from facilitation to governance roles. This model builds not only individual leadership but a collective presence of women in spaces traditionally dominated by male NGO leaders. Community members report that they feel **less "talked down to" and more involved in shaping interventions**.

These examples demonstrate how organizations that center women's leadership from within communities build stronger trust and participation, creating sustainable impact through authentic representation.

B. More Contextually Attuned Programs

IWWAGE, led by economists with a gender lens, has prioritized research on unpaid care work, time-use surveys, and gender-disaggregated labor force data. Their leadership's grounding in feminist theory and economic policy ensures that macro-level research reflects micro-level realities.

Asar's internal rhythms, including flexible planning and peer-based accountability, reflect the same intersectional values they promote externally. Their partnerships with ecosystem actors are often shaped by these values, leading to trust-based collaboration rather than transactional project implementation.



The Teacher Foundation has integrated emotional well-being into its teacher development programs. Its internal systems reflect this same care; onboarding, induction, and appraisals account for relational dynamics, not just task delivery. This alignment between internal systems and external program ethos strengthens program credibility and outcomes.

Challenges and Recommendations

What gets in the way, and what can we do about it?

Key Barriers

- As demonstrated across the organizations studied, women's leadership can reshape how development organizations work, relate, and thrive. However, even among organizations committed to equity, structural and cultural barriers continue to hinder the advancement and retention of women leaders, especially those from historically marginalized groups. These challenges are neither incidental nor new. They are embedded in the assumptions, systems, and everyday practices of the sector.
- Three interlocking domains of barriers emerged in the study: normative, systemic, and policy-level.



1. 1. Normative Barriers

Gendered norms continue to shape organizational expectations, leadership behavior, and perceptions of credibility. These are among the most persistent and difficult to shift, especially when they manifest subtly in day-to-day interactions and decisions.

- **Cultural Expectations:** Women are expected to be assertive enough to lead but not so assertive that they are seen as aggressive. At the same time, many are balancing intense care responsibilities, often without institutional support. This dual burden leads to burnout and slower career progression.
- **Stereotype Threat:** Several women leaders shared that they often felt the need to over-prepare or self-censor in leadership spaces, fearing judgment if they expressed uncertainty. As one Assistant Director observed, *“Many deserving women who are feminists don’t get the chance to grow into leadership positions because of the existing gender norms.”*
- **Lack of Role Models:** In organizations without visible women in senior decision-making roles, younger professionals have fewer reference points or mentorship opportunities. This absence of relatable pathways can reinforce self-doubt and hesitation around leadership ambition.

Even in organizations that champion feminist values, the internalization of social norms and external pressures around caregiving, mobility, and “appropriate” conduct continue to shape who gets seen and supported as a potential leader.

2. Systemic Barriers

Several organizations in the cohort highlighted operational and structural gaps that limit women's leadership growth, even when there is intent to promote inclusion.


- **Weak HR and MIS Systems:** In many grassroots or mid-sized organizations, basic HR functions such as documentation, progression tracking, and leadership development are either informal or inconsistently applied. This lack of structure makes it difficult to identify and support potential women leaders systematically.
- **Financial Constraints:** With significant dependence on restricted donor funding, many organizations struggle to allocate resources for leadership development, especially for women. Investments in coaching, upskilling, or second-line leadership planning are often deprioritized in favor of short-term program targets.
- **Fundraising Challenges:** Organizations led by women or those attempting to build diverse leadership pipelines often find themselves disadvantaged in competitive fundraising environments. As highlighted during the study, fundraising itself is a gatekeeping domain, and current donor engagement models rarely prioritize capacity building around inclusive leadership.
- **Flat Structures Without Growth Pathways:** While non-hierarchical structures are often viewed positively, in practice, they can create ambiguity around roles, promotions, and authority. Women leaders in such environments reported that the absence of defined ladders or transitions often stalled their growth. As one CFO noted, *“Organizations need formal recruitment processes and intentional retention efforts to scale and ensure diversity.”*

Systemic barriers are particularly limiting when they interact with normative ones, for instance, when informal governance compounds pre-existing gendered expectations, making it even harder for women to assert leadership.

3. Policy Barriers

Even organizations that recognize the value of gender equity often fall short on formalizing it. The absence of codified, intersectional, and consistently applied policies limits both leadership continuity and institutional accountability.

- **Lack of Codified DEI Policies:** Many organizations, especially smaller ones, do not have written policies around diversity, equity, and inclusion. This includes gaps in formal parental leave, return-to-work pathways, grievance redressal, or affirmative action in hiring. While intent may exist, a lack of formalization leads to inconsistency and unequal access.
- **Unclear Onboarding and Progression:** Staff members shared that onboarding was often informal, with little clarity on expectations, deliverables, or progression timelines. This creates a disconnect between ambition and opportunity, especially for women navigating new roles or returning after a career break.

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- **Retention Challenges:** As noted in earlier sections, women's retention drops significantly at mid-career stages when policies are either absent or applied unevenly. Inconsistent leave practices, lack of care infrastructure, or poor performance alignment contribute to demotivation and exit.
 - **Mentorship Gaps:** Despite the recognized importance of peer learning and coaching, structured mentorship platforms remain rare. Where they do exist, they are often donor-funded pilots rather than embedded institutional practices. Several leaders expressed the need for ongoing, in-house leadership development mechanisms for emerging women leaders, especially those from non-metropolitan or marginalized backgrounds.

Together, these policy-level challenges create fragility in the leadership pipeline. Even where values align with gender equity, the absence of institutional scaffolding weakens the ability of organizations to consistently grow and retain women leaders.

How organizations are intentionally dismantling barriers and enabling women's leadership.

Despite the constraints outlined above, the 12 organizations studied provide compelling evidence that inclusive leadership is not only possible but also replicable when certain enabling practices are put in place. These practices range from values-led culture building to operational systems that codify equity. Importantly, they don't rely on individual effort or personality-driven leadership. Instead, they embed inclusion into the fabric of how the organization functions.

A. Addressing Normative Barriers: Shaping Culture from Within

As already noted in Section 2.1, changing internal culture is foundational for enabling women to lead authentically and sustainably. Organizations that succeed in this area use intentional tools to shape team norms and dismantle unspoken biases.

- **Codifying Organizational Culture:** CSF has developed a set of complementary documents that define its values, competencies, talent brand promise, and expectations from managers and teams. Together, they codify the organization's culture- clarifying what it stands for and how it operates, while allowing flexibility across leadership behaviors, performance standards, and everyday practices. This ensures transparency and accountability in how culture is lived across the organization.
- **Community-Based Hiring and Role Modeling:** At **WORD** and **Utthan**, local women are not only hired into facilitation roles but are intentionally elevated to governance positions. Their visibility reinforces a new norm around who can lead, especially in rural contexts where caste and gender often intersect to limit opportunity.
- **Feminist Organizing Models:** Both **Utthan** and **Asar** have roots in feminist collectives and use participatory structures to normalize collective decision-making, reduce hierarchy, and create safer spaces for dissent. These cultural elements counter the stereotype that women must adopt dominant (often masculinized) styles of leadership to be seen as competent.
- **Peer Learning as Normalized Practice:** Instead of depending on one-off workshops, organizations like **FAT** and **The Teacher Foundation** embed peer learning circles into their regular operations. These spaces foster informal mentorship, surface unspoken challenges, and allow emerging leaders to learn without fear of judgment.

B. Addressing Systemic Barriers: Investing in Structures That Scale

Many of the systemic barriers identified in 4.1 stem from underinvestment in organizational infrastructure. The most promising practices in the cohort involve strengthening systems without compromising values.

- **Dedicated HR and MIS Functions:** Magic Bus Foundation has integrated diversity and inclusion into its MIS and appraisal systems. Leadership is not assessed solely on programmatic outcomes but on how equitably they build and manage teams. This allows DEI indicators to be tracked at scale, tied to performance, and improved over time.

- **Talent Pipeline Visibility:** At Indus Action, talent development is structured with transparent growth pathways and role-specific competencies. These are not static but adapted to reflect caregiving breaks and lived realities. This clarity helps build second-line leadership and reduces ambiguity around promotions.
- **Gender Audits and Budgeting:** FAT conducts internal gender audits to assess where inclusion efforts are landing and where gaps remain. These audits are tied to gender-sensitive budgeting practices, ensuring that equity goals are backed by resources, not just statements of intent.
- **Operationalizing Flexibility:** As highlighted earlier in Section 3.1, organizations like WORD and Asar have systematized flexibility through rhythm-based planning, role re-designs post-maternity, and predictable cycles for workload negotiation. This moves them from ad-hoc accommodation to structural care infrastructure.

These practices show that even in resource-constrained environments, deliberate systems thinking can create pathways for women's growth and retention.

C. Addressing Policy Barriers: Moving from Intent to Institutionalization

Without codified policies, inclusion efforts remain inconsistent and dependent on leadership goodwill. The organizations studied have taken various steps to formalize support for women's leadership.

- **Return-to-Work and Re-entry Pathways:** As already described in Section 3.1, Indus Action and WORD have introduced structured re-entry support with clear onboarding steps, expectation realignment, and role flexibility. These policies help retain mid-career women and prevent loss of institutional knowledge.
- **Codified DEI Frameworks:** CSF and Indus Action have gone beyond surface-level commitments by embedding DEI into performance appraisals, hiring protocols, and compensation frameworks. This helps de-personalize decisions and ensures fairness across identity categories.
- **Mentorship and Coaching Structures:** While informal mentorship exists across several organizations, FAT and The Teacher Foundation have made it a formal part of their staff development approach. FAT's model in particular builds leadership from within its program alumni base, closing the loop between community experience and institutional leadership.
- **Onboarding for Inclusion:** The Teacher Foundation places explicit focus on relational culture in its onboarding process. Rather than a transactional checklist, induction includes training on inclusive behaviors, reporting mechanisms, and feedback loops, setting the tone for equity from the start.
- **Embedding DEI in Governance:** North East Network and Utthan have intentionally structured their boards and leadership councils to reflect diversity across gender, caste, and geography. This ensures that institutional decisions are shaped by those who carry lived insight, not just managerial experience.

Together, these practices suggest that policy is not simply about documentation. When done right, it is a design tool that shapes organizational priorities, protects against regression, and enables equity to persist through transitions.

Challenges	How organizations are solving for it-Best Practices
Normative Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gendered norms shape credibility & leadership behavior. Cultural expectations: balancing assertiveness & caregiving leads to burnout. Stereotype threat: women over-prepare, self-censor. Lack of role models in senior roles. Even feminist orgs are not immune to social norms. 	Shaping Culture from Within <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Codifying culture: CSF's "culture books" clarify norms & expectations. Community-based role modeling: WORD & Utthan elevate local women to governance roles. Feminist organizing models: Utthan & Asar use participatory structures & collective decision-making. Peer learning circles: FAT & Teacher Foundation normalize mentorship and open dialogue.
Systemic Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weak HR/MIS systems make progression tracking inconsistent. Financial constraints limit investment in women's leadership. Flat structures blur growth pathways & stall promotions. 	Investing in Structures that Scale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> HR & MIS integration: Magic Bus Foundation ties DEI into appraisal systems. Talent pipeline visibility: Indus Action designs transparent growth pathways & competencies. Gender audits & budgeting: Asar & FAT link audits to gender-sensitive budgets. Operationalizing flexibility: WORD & Asar embed structural care practices (post-maternity redesign, workload negotiation).
Policy Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of codified DEI policies (parental leave, grievance, affirmative hiring). Informal onboarding & unclear progression pathways. Retention drops mid-career due to poor leave/care infrastructure. Mentorship is often an ad-hoc, donor-driven pilot. 	From Intent to Institutionalization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Return-to-work pathways: Indus Action & WORD create structured re-entry systems. Codified DEI frameworks: CSF & Indus Action embed DEI into performance, hiring, pay. Mentorship & coaching: FAT & Teacher Foundation make mentorship formal & continuous. Embedding DEI in governance: NEN & Utthan structure boards to reflect caste, gender, and geography diversity.


Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that women’s leadership in the social impact sector cannot be reduced to increasing representation alone. It is most powerful when it is intentionally supported, structurally enabled, and meaningfully integrated into the DNA of organizations.

Structural Lever	Strategic Advantage & Rationale
Localized Leadership Models	Retains talent within their socio-cultural context, strengthens community trust, and leverages local intelligence without forcing relocation to urban hubs. Reduces attrition and preserves place-based credibility.
Measurable Inclusion Systems	Translates equity goals into operational metrics. Tracks representation, behaviours, and advancement rates to identify gaps, enable data-driven interventions, and ensure leadership accountability.
Embedded Mentorship Mechanisms	Accelerates leadership readiness by pairing emerging leaders with senior decision-makers in strategic contexts. Builds confidence, political acumen, and organizational visibility faster than training alone.
Distributed Decision-Making	Broadens leadership entry points, diversifies perspectives in strategic planning, and strengthens organizational resilience by reducing dependence on individual personalities.

Women Leadership journeys resemble a labyrinth rather than a glass ceiling- a non-linear, and filled with systemic twists. Individual determination alone cannot overcome the barriers embedded in norms, policies, and structures. What matters is how organizations choose to design the pathways through that labyrinth, removing dead ends, widening entry points, and providing the scaffolding that enables women not just to enter leadership, but to thrive within it.

Across the sector, three patterns emerge. First, leadership does not need to mirror hierarchical or founder-centric models to be effective. Inclusive and distributed models of decision-making can strengthen alignment between internal culture and external mission, ensuring that organizational practices resonate more deeply with communities. Second, sustainability in women’s leadership depends on the design of supportive systems, re-entry pathways, flexible policies, codified norms, and transparent progression criteria. These structures turn equity from a matter of goodwill into an organizational standard that persists through change and growth. Third, embedding equity into



accountability and performance frameworks transforms inclusion into a collective responsibility, not a personal burden, ensuring that diversity goals are measured, rewarded, and continually improved upon.

Importantly, women leaders bring strategic value not by reproducing dominant leadership styles, but by reshaping what leadership itself means. When inclusion is institutionalized, leadership becomes more relational, participatory, and attuned to the realities of the workforce and the communities served. This shift delivers advantages that extend beyond equity: stronger team cohesion, improved retention of talent, greater organizational adaptability, and deeper trust with stakeholders.

The sector now faces a choice. Women's leadership can remain an exception, dependent on isolated champions and fragile initiatives, or it can be recognized as a lever for organizational resilience and impact. Moving forward requires investment not in "fixing women," but in redesigning systems to normalize inclusive leadership as core infrastructure.

Inclusive leadership is no longer an aspirational goal; it is emerging as a strategic imperative. The opportunity lies in building organizational maps through the labyrinth, where equity is embedded into systems, and women are not just included, but equipped and expected to lead with resilience and vision.

Annexure A: Participating Organizations

The authors extend their gratitude to the following organizations for generously sharing their time and insights, which informed the findings of this study:

- Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT)
- Central Square Foundation (CSF)
- North East Network (NEN)
- Indus Action
- Asar
- Magic Bus Foundation
- Utthan
- WORD (Women's organization for Rural Development)
- The Teacher Foundation
- Youth4Jobs
- International Center for Research on Women (ICRW Asia)
- Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE)

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