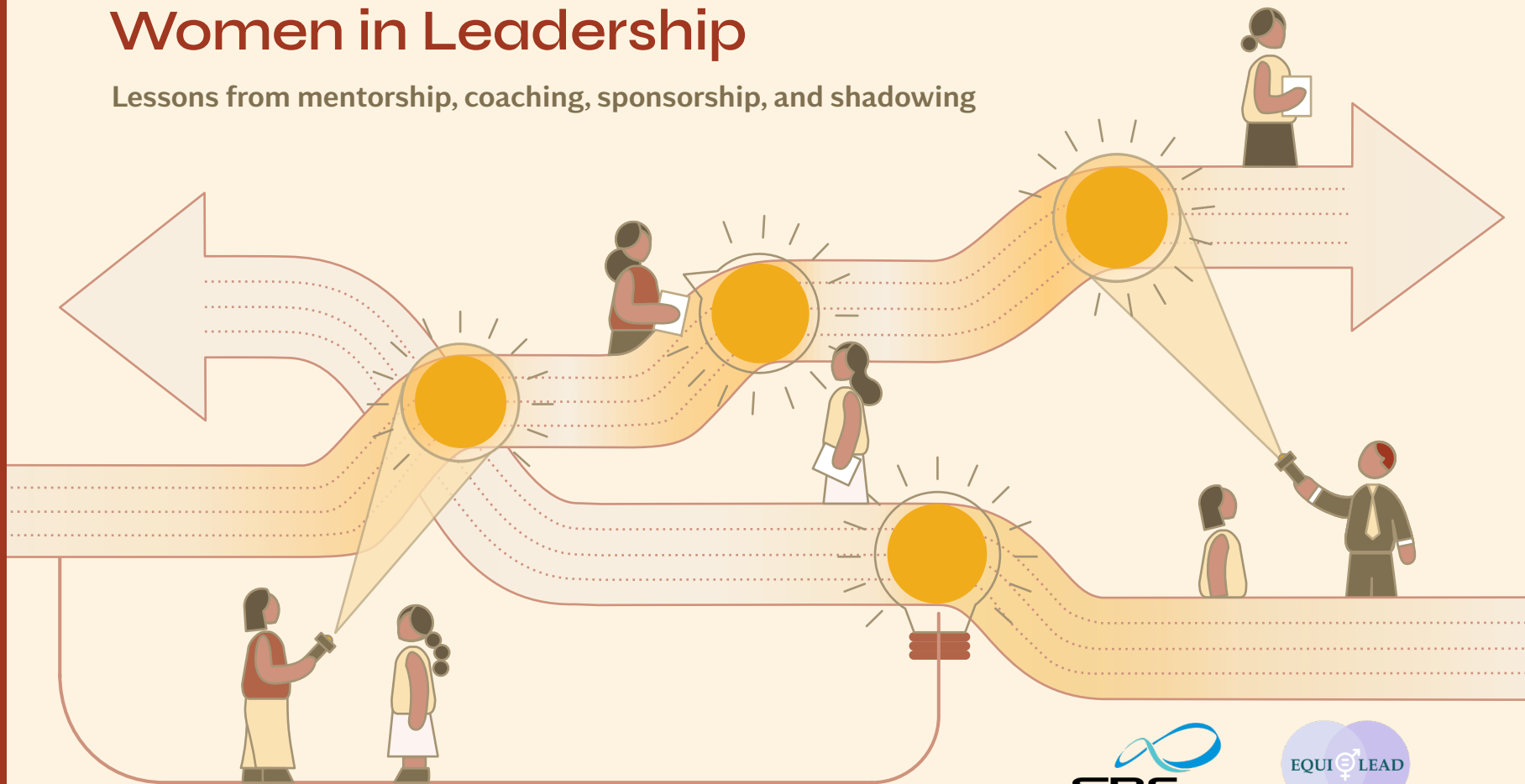


# Balancing the Scale: Relational Models to Advance Women in Leadership

Lessons from mentorship, coaching, sponsorship, and shadowing





# Acknowledgements:

This knowledge report was a collaborative effort led by Dasra's **WomenLead India Alliance**.

Special thanks to **EquiLead**—including **Meghana Rao**, **Sneha Churiwal** and **Anchal Kakkar** - for their partnership and for sharing valuable perspectives throughout the process.

Strategic conceptualization and authorship were led by **Anamika Misra**, **Roshni Mukherji**, and **Yamini Atmavilas** at **Dasra**. Editorial contributions and writing support were provided by **Epcita Shukla** (Dasra) and **Purva Gupta**. This work was further enriched by the steadfast involvement of the wider Dasra team, whose dedication and collaboration were instrumental in bringing this report to life.

We are grateful to **Shivani Kumar** and the **CII Centre for Women Leadership** for their ongoing collaboration and shared vision to advance women's leadership. Their engagement enabled a series of industry roundtables that shaped several of the reflections presented here.

We also extend heartfelt thanks to the many practitioners and leaders who generously contributed their time and experience—your insights made this report possible.

This publication was supported by **Radhika Bharat Ram** and the **SRF Foundation**, whose commitment to inclusive development and knowledge-building enabled this contribution to the field.

And finally, a sincere thank you to all our **WomenLead India Alliance partners** across business, philanthropy, and the development sector. Your continued efforts to advance gender equity and enable more women and girls to lead, thrive, and shape the future, inspire and strengthen this collective journey.



## About WomenLead India Alliance

The **WomenLead India Alliance** is a cross-sector collaboration anchored by **Dasra**, bringing together diverse partners from philanthropy, business, and the development sector to collectively advance women's and girls' leadership in India.

At its core, the Alliance is about building a stronger, more connected ecosystem — one where partners work together to generate evidence, surface lived experiences, co-create practical strategies, and direct meaningful resources toward enabling more women to lead and thrive.

Through these efforts, the Alliance is amplifying what works and laying the groundwork for long-term, systemic change in how leadership is understood, supported, and sustained across sectors

## About EquiLead

**EquiLead** is a strategic initiative, supported by **Climate Asia** and **Arthan Foundation**, committed to accelerating progress towards SDG 5 by engineering women-led development by:

- Enabling organisations to make their workplaces become inclusive and gender equitable in perspective, policy and practice.
- Enabling more women+ to rise and grow in leadership in organisations committed to social impact by facilitating linkages to growth opportunities and a community of peers and mentors.

Anchored in the values of “**Equity**” and “**Leadership**”, we envision an ecosystem where women+ leadership will empower social impact-focused institutions to become gender-just organisations of the future and bring underrepresented voices to the decision-making table ensuring that programmes are equitable and thoughtfully designed to meet the needs of diverse demographics.

## About SRF foundation

**SRF Foundation** is the CSR arm of **SRF Limited**, a leading chemicals conglomerate dedicated to advancing quality education and community development across India.

Established in 1982, the Foundation draws inspiration from its founders, Late Sir Shri Ram and Late Dr. Bharat Ram, and remains committed to transforming education and empowering communities nationwide. Guided by the vision of Padma Shri Late Mrs. Manju Bharat Ram, **The Shri Ram Schools** in Delhi NCR and **SRF Vidyalayas** in Chennai and Gurugram were established as models of excellence and innovation in education. Beyond its schools, SRF Foundation partners with communities, government agencies, and corporate, and non-profit organizations to deliver impactful programs in education, vocational training, healthcare, environment, and art & culture, fostering self-reliance and sustainable development among underprivileged groups.

# Mind the Gap: Gender Disparities in Leadership

The presence of women in leadership roles is widely recognised as bringing significant benefits to both, organisations and society. Yet, gender disparities in leadership remain stark.

In India, only 3.2% of Fortune 1000 companies are led by women MDs or CEOs, highlighting the persistent underrepresentation of women in the private sector<sup>1</sup>.

Fortune 1000 companies led by women MDs or CEOs



The pattern holds across its sub-sectors; for example, in the hospital and healthcare industry, women make up to 46% of the workforce but hold only 18% of the leadership positions<sup>2</sup>.

Workforce Composition - Women - Healthcare Industry

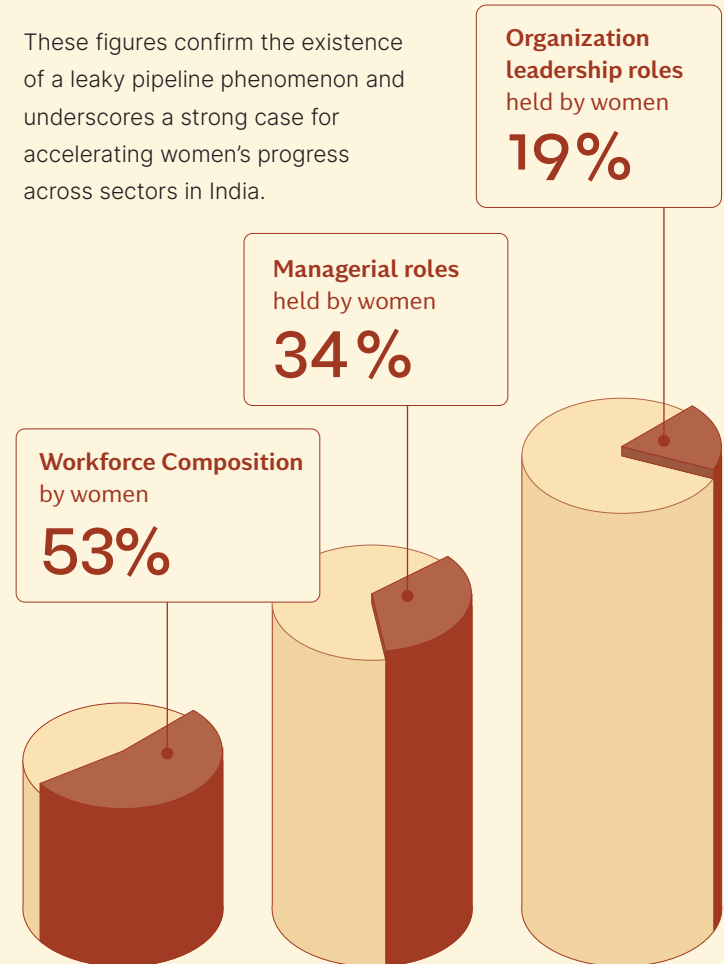


Leadership positions held by women - Healthcare Industry



The social impact sector mirrors these inequalities. While 53% of the workforce comprises women, just 34% hold managerial roles, and only 19% women lead organisations<sup>3</sup>.

These figures confirm the existence of a leaky pipeline phenomenon and underscores a strong case for accelerating women's progress across sectors in India.



# Developmental Relationships: Unlocking Career Growth Beyond Training

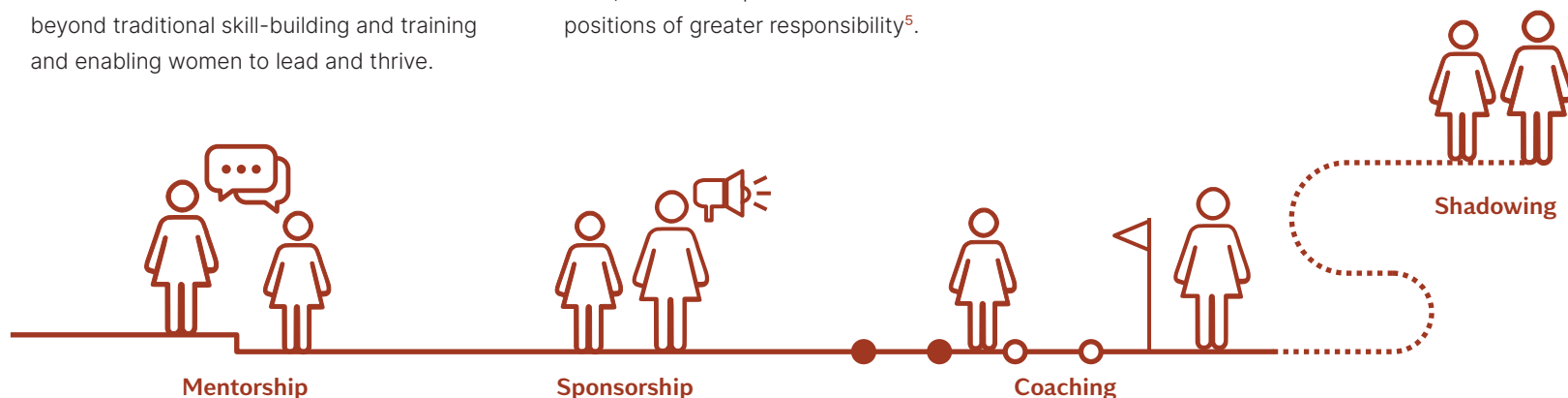
## A strategic solution to advance women's leadership

Organisations use a range of strategies to advance women's leadership, including upskilling opportunities, work-life balance initiatives, equitable recruitment and promotion policies, networking opportunities and diversity and bias training, among others<sup>4</sup>. One particularly impactful strategic intervention is fostering developmental relationships – access to supportive connections in the world of work that extend beyond traditional skill-building and training and enabling women to lead and thrive.

**Developmental relationships are learning relationships that enable career growth and advancement. They comprise a network of individuals who actively invest in and take action to support an individual's career and personal development.**

Engaging in such high-quality relationships supports essential components of leadership development, including the cultivation of leadership identity, effectiveness in leadership roles, and the acquisition of skills to move into positions of greater responsibility<sup>5</sup>.

Research suggests that developmental relationships are critical to leadership learning. The widely recognised 70-20-10 model of leadership development indicates that 70% of learning comes from on-the-job experiences, 20% of the leadership development comes from fostering developmental relationships as compared to just 10% from formal training<sup>6</sup>. For women in leadership, these relationships can be pivotal in navigating workplace bias, building confidence, and accessing influential networks.



## Different Sectors, Different Pathways

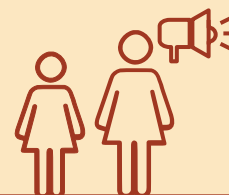
While both private and social impact sector organisations recognise the value of developmental relationships, the way these relationships are implemented and facilitated differs significantly. In the private sector, such models are typically embedded within structured, organisation-led leadership development programs. In contrast, in the social impact sector, these relationships are often facilitated by external actors, such as networks, fellowships, or leadership intermediaries. In the social impact sector, they tend to be more need-based or ad hoc rather than institutionalised. As a result, access may be uneven and dependent on individual initiative or external opportunity. This disparity highlights an important opportunity: by capturing and codifying lessons from various approaches, organizations can create more sustainable and equitable leadership pathways for women across sectors, ensuring that all women have access to the support necessary for career advancement.

This paper focusses on four key developmental relationships for advancing women in leadership: mentorship, sponsorship, coaching and shadowing.

### 1 Mentorship



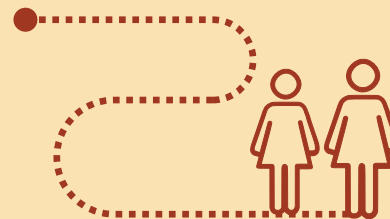
### 2 Sponsorship



### 3 Coaching



### 4 Shadowing



# The Case for Action: What the Evidence Shows

## Developmental relationships support leadership advancement

These interventions by organisations can accelerate women's leadership by both increasing their representation and enhancing their effectiveness leading to a greater number of women occupying influential positions and delivering improved performance and impact. According to a literature review conducted by the Udaiti Foundation and Dasra for Indian healthcare organizations- mentorship and sponsorship were the most cited (67%) leadership accelerator strategies companies are adopting.<sup>4</sup>

Secondary research points to the following impact of these strategies:

### RETAINING AND PROMOTING HIGH POTENTIAL WOMEN:

**Mentorship** - Women with mentors are 5 times more likely to be promoted<sup>7</sup>, and mentees have a 49% lower turnover risk — saving around \$3,000 per participant annually in recruitment, onboarding, and training costs<sup>8</sup>.

**Sponsorship** - Women with sponsors are 20% more likely to be promoted. Also, sponsored individuals typically earn 11.6% more than their unsponsored counterparts – a key factor in retention<sup>9</sup>.

**Coaching** - Among 267 senior women coached for two years, many received promotions including board level as a result<sup>10</sup>.

### CULTIVATING A LEADERSHIP PIPELINE:

**Mentorship** - 28% of women with mentors reach senior leadership roles, compared to 19% without mentors<sup>11</sup>. Mentorship equips women with essential skills and networks, increasing their likelihood of attaining senior leadership positions, thereby fostering a sustainable and inclusive leadership pipeline and reducing reliance on external hiring.

**Sponsorship** - Sponsored women are 167% more likely to receive high-profile stretch assignments — critical for attaining C-suite readiness<sup>9</sup>.

### BOOSTING PERFORMANCE:

**Mentorship** for women leaders can significantly increase their performance, given that workplace mentorship of managers resulted in a significant boost in productivity of 88%<sup>12</sup>.

**Coaching** - 70% individuals who received coaching improved their work performance, relationships, and communication<sup>13</sup>.



# Deep Dive: Exploring the Four Relationship Models

## 01. Mentorship: Guiding Growth Through Trusted Connections

**Mentorship is a collaborative learning relationship in which two or more individuals exchange knowledge, insights, and experiences to foster personal and professional growth.**

Typically, a more experienced colleague guides a less experienced employee to navigate career pathways, strengthen competencies, and build confidence. It is one of the most widely adopted developmental relationship models, with organisations using it to support overall career development, thereby improving retention, and building a more inclusive leadership pipeline. It is especially effective for emerging and mid-level women leaders, particularly when designed with intentional mentor-mentee

pairings based on shared values, professional interests, and long-term goals.

Mentorship can take place in one-to-one or group formats and can be delivered in person, virtually, or in hybrid settings. Programmes may be organised internally, led by senior leaders and executives, or externally with industry experts outside the organisation often through platforms that provide

structured mentorship, leadership training, and networking opportunities.

The success of mentorship depends on strong mentor-mentee alignment, clearly defined expectations, and consistent engagement over time. Common risks include poor matching, lack of structure, or ad hoc implementation, which can limit the effectiveness and sustainability of the programme.

### One-to-one versus group format options



**1:1 relationship** - A mentor is paired with a single mentee, providing tailored advice, and career development support aligned with mentee's unique needs.



**Group/cohort-based** - Single mentor works with multiple mentees simultaneously, promoting collaborative learning and shared experiences.

## 02. Coaching: Building Skills with Purpose and Precision

Coaching is a structured, goal-oriented relationship that focuses on skill-building and performance improvement.

It is widely used to support mid- and senior-level professionals in developing targeted competencies or navigating leadership transitions. Unlike mentorship, which is broader in scope and emphasises a long-term relationship that supports holistic career growth, coaching is typically more formalised and time-bound, with defined goals and clear success metrics or KPIs. It can be delivered by certified internal or external coaches, in one-to-one or group formats, and through in-person, virtual, or hybrid modes.

Coaching is particularly effective for organizations able to invest the necessary budget and leadership time to provide intensive, sustained support. However, while coaching is highly effective in improving individual performance, it does not always address the structural or systemic barriers that women often face in advancing to leadership roles.

## 03. Sponsorship: Powering Up Advancement Through Influence

Sponsorship is a high-impact professional relationship in which a senior leader, a sponsor, actively advocates for, promotes, and creates opportunities for a junior professional, known as the protégé.

Unlike mentoring, which focuses on guidance and advice, sponsorship is about using one's influence and position to advance the protégé's career such as recommending them for promotions, nominating them for high visibility projects, or introducing their protégé to key industry connections to expand their professional network.

**Sponsorship is particularly crucial for women in leadership, as it helps overcome barriers to advancement in corporate and professional spaces.** It is most impactful for women at mid- to senior-career stages, especially in navigating the leadership pipeline. It is typically a one-to-one relationship, most effective in person (or hybrid if needed), and demands a high level

of engagement from the sponsor, including public advocacy and behind-the-scenes support.

**“My manager created growth opportunities by recommending me for projects that align with the skills and experience needed for advancement. This was key in my advancement”**

- VP of Nursing



Successful sponsorship requires strong organisational culture and clear senior leadership buy-in, as well as mechanisms to ensure fairness and transparency. Risks include perceived favouritism or unconscious bias in selection.

It is important to note that unlike mentoring and coaching which are more commonly prevalent, true sponsorship remains rare and often misunderstood. It is often confused with financial support for education or upskilling, rather than being recognised as direct career

advocacy by senior leaders. This reflects a systemic gap but also highlights a strategic opportunity: developing more structured, transparent sponsorship models, particularly in sectors such as the private healthcare and social impact sector, where improving women's representation in senior leadership roles remains a priority.

#### **04. Shadowing: Learning by Watching Leaders in Action**

---

**Shadowing, also known as job shadowing, is an on-the-job learning method used for professional development. It enables an employee, often a junior team member or new hire to learn directly from a more experienced colleague by observing their day-to-day work, decision-making, and interactions.**

---

Through this immersive experience, the observer or “shadow” gains a deeper understanding of the responsibilities, challenges, and skills required in a particular role by closely following the “shadow host.”

While commonly used for early-career professionals, shadowing is increasingly applied to mid-and senior-level employees as part of career development, leadership exposure, or succession planning initiatives. It provides real-time visibility into new roles or leadership positions and offers valuable insights into behavioural dynamics, team leadership, and strategic decision-making. Shadowing is typically one-to-one activity conducted in person, as it relies heavily on observational learning, informal interactions, and real-time presence. It is considered a low-cost model, requiring primarily logistical coordination and leader availability, rather than large-scale budget outlays.

The effectiveness of shadowing depends on having a well-structured experience with clearly defined goals and learning objectives. It is also important to determine a clear duration that aligns with the intended outcomes and complexity of the role being shadowed. Building trust between the shadow and host is essential, as is addressing power dynamics and ensuring confidentiality, particularly when observing leadership or sensitive discussions.

However, shadowing may not be suitable for all functions, such as HR, finance, or legal where exposure to confidential information could pose challenges. It may also not be suitable for remote teams, as the absence of in-person interaction can limit the observer's ability to grasp informal cues, team dynamics, and unspoken aspects of leadership that are central to the learning experience.

The table below provides an overview of the mentorship, coaching, sponsorship and shadowing.

## Different Developmental Relationship Models: An Overview

	Primary Purpose	Best Use Case By Human Resources (HR)	Mode In person OR virtual	1:1 OR Group	Depth of Engagement	Organised Internal/ External Initiative	Key Enablers/Success Factors	Risks	Effectiveness (Data)	Organisational Examples (Detailed out in Annex 1)
MENTORSHIP	Overall career development of employees	Widely recommended for middle management or emerging leaders <sup>14</sup>	In person, virtual or hybrid	1:1 and group	Medium	Internal and External	-Intentional pairing to include shared values, interests and experiences for trust-based relationship -Goal-setting at the outset -Multiple touch-points and periodic sessions between mentor-mentee	-Risk of mentee-mentor mismatch -Without structure and processes, mentorship may become ad-hoc -Lack of mentor capacity	Formal mentorship seen to increase women in leadership:  Women with mentors are 5x more likely to be promoted <sup>7</sup>	<b>Lupin's</b> iMPact programme  <b>Zydus's</b> WINGS initiative  <b>Max Healthcare's</b> Global Women Leadership in Healthcare programme
COACHING	Skills development and performance improvement	Widely used in mid-senior levels <sup>15</sup>	In person, virtual or hybrid	1:1 and group	High	Internal and External	-Skilled coach -Targeted KPIs for success metrics -Time-bound structure	-May not address systemic barriers as focus is on skill development -Resource-intensive, making 1:1 coaching challenging for larger teams	70% of individuals with coaches improved their work performance, relationships, and communication <sup>13</sup>	<b>Dr. Reddy's</b> Chrysalis – coaching part of women development programme
SPONSORSHIP	Career advancement via active advocacy by influential, senior leader/s	Mostly used in mid-senior levels <sup>9 16</sup>	Generally in person. Can be virtual or hybrid for geographically spread out organisations	Typically 1:1	Very High	Internal	-Leadership buy-in -High visibility and strategic assignments or projects	-Risk of favouritism -Requires cultural readiness and buy-in	Women with sponsors are <sup>9</sup> :  20% more likely to be promoted  167% more likely to be offered high-profile, stretch assignments – key opportunities to demonstrate readiness for C-suite roles	Rare in India – significant opportunity gap
SHADOWING	Exposure to a new/different role and learning by observing senior in that role	Commonly used for early professionals, but also increasingly at mid-senior levels for career development and succession planning <sup>17 18 19</sup>	In-person	Typically 1:1	Low	Internal	- Structured shadow experience -Clear duration as per objectives -Building trust, addressing power dynamics, and ensuring confidentiality <sup>20</sup>	-Observational learning may seem passive - Not suited for sensitive roles (HR, legal, finance) which may expose one to sensitive information -May not be suitable for remote teams	Boosts leadership aspiration: Early-career nurses in Ontario gained clarity and confidence to pursue leadership roles after shadowing experiences <sup>21</sup> (Qualitative)	<b>Max Healthcare</b> – leadership shadowing model

# Choosing the Right Fit:








## Comparative Implementation Insights

The choice between mentorship, coaching, sponsorship, or shadowing as a strategy to advance women's leadership should be informed by a range of implementation considerations. These considerations reflect the design, delivery, and organisational context that must be thoughtfully addressed to ensure the chosen model is effective and aligned with the intended purpose.

### Key implementation considerations include:

- ₹ **Budget required** – The financial costs and resource requirements.
- 🕒 **Leadership commitment/time needed** – The time and engagement required from the leader(s) directly involved in delivering the intervention (e.g. mentor, internal coach, sponsor, or leader being shadowed).
- 👤 **Cohort or individual-based** – Whether the model is implemented in a one-to-one format or in a group setting.
- 💻 **Hybrid possibility** – Whether the model can be effectively delivered in a combination of in-person and virtual formats.
- ⚙️ **Organisational readiness** – The operational and cultural preparedness of an organisation to implement developmental relationship models. This includes the presence of clear processes, programme management capacity (e.g. HR or Leadership & Development teams), inclusive practices, and systems to monitor and support participation and outcomes.
- 🕒 **Time to impact** – The typical timeframe in which visible or measurable benefits from the model begin to emerge.
- 📊 **Business case strength** – The extent to which the model can be positioned internally as a strategic intervention for advancing women in leadership.

The table below provides a comparative overview of the four developmental relationship models against these implementation considerations:

Implementation Considerations	MENTORSHIP	COACHING	SPONSORSHIP	SHADOWING
 <b>Budget required</b>	<b>Costs for coordination, training, and potentially platforms or tools.</b> If using external experts, costs increase due to professional fees.	<b>Cost for hiring certified coaches</b> or training internal staff, plus ongoing programme management.	<b>Lower direct costs</b> but requires administrative support for matching, tracking, and facilitation.	<b>Mostly logistical</b> - scheduling, coordination, minimal cost.
 <b>Leadership commitment/ time needed</b>	Mentor/s require <b>consistent engagement over several months</b> , plus preparation and check-ins	Internal coaches require <b>significant time</b> for training, sessions, and tracking; more intensive than mentoring.	<b>Sustained senior leadership engagement</b> to advocate in strategic settings, create visibility opportunities for their proteges.	<b>Dedicated time needed</b> for direct observation and regular debriefs with shadowee.
 <b>Cohort or individual-based</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
 <b>Hybrid possibility</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Not ideal</b> , as it reduces visibility of protégé's work, slower trust-building, fewer informal opportunities for advocacy.	<b>Not ideal</b> , as it fragments the experience, reducing the participant's ability to observe body language, team dynamics, and unspoken cues in real time.
 <b>Organisational readiness</b>	Needs structured matching, basic oversight, and inclusive participation processes.	Involves formal design, trained coaches, and impact tracking.	Requires senior leader engagement, clear selection criteria, and systems to track outcomes.	Requires minimal structure; mostly logistical coordination and leader openness.
 <b>Time to impact</b>	<b>1-3 months</b>	<b>4-12 months</b>	<b>6-12 plus months</b>	<b>12 plus months</b>
 <b>Business case strength</b>	<b>Strong.</b> Clear data on retention, promotion, and leadership development.	<b>Strong.</b> Clear data on promotion, performance and leadership effectiveness.	<b>Variable.</b> High potential impact, but outcomes are harder to measure and attribute to structured programmes, as sponsorship happens outside a measurable system	<b>Moderate</b> , evidence is mostly qualitative and less directly tied to promotions or retention.

# Blended and Layered Approaches

Combining multiple developmental relationship models to offer a more comprehensive and sustained support to women across their leadership journeys.

Each developmental relationship model—whether mentorship, coaching, sponsorship, or shadowing—serves a distinct function in leadership growth, with its effectiveness defined not by the intensity of engagement but by its alignment with an organisation's leadership development objectives. Increasingly, organisations are adopting blended or layered approaches, combining multiple developmental relationship models to offer a more comprehensive and sustained support to women across their leadership journeys. Such synergy enables women to receive guidance, skill-building, visibility, and real-time learning at various career stages.

## Why Synergy Matters



### Multi-model approaches offer complementary benefits:

Coaching builds targeted skills, mentorship provides developmental feedback, sponsorship opens access to influential networks, and shadowing offers behavioural insights.



### Layered formats enable continuity:

Emerging leaders may benefit from mentoring and shadowing, while mid- and senior-level women gain from coaching and sponsorship—supporting career growth over time.



### Blending internal and external mechanisms:

Especially in the development sector, where internal capacity may be limited, ecosystem actors often fill the gap through peer networks, fellowships, and leadership development programmes

According to **Forbes**, combining coaching and mentoring enables organisations to identify and nurture leadership talent, improve retention, and strengthen succession pipelines<sup>22</sup>.

Research by **Boston Consulting Group (BCG)** shows that women with both **a mentor and a sponsor** are significantly more likely to advance from middle management to senior leadership roles<sup>23</sup>.

The synergistic value of integrating different models has been widely acknowledged in both research and practice— Examples of organizations practicing synergistic leadership development:

- **Dr. Agarwal's Eye Hospital** implements a **layered mentorship model** where immediate managers provide informal mentorship and advocate for high-potential employees, while senior leaders remain accessible for informal guidance. This organic mix of mentorship and sponsorship builds leadership capacity over time, even in the absence of a formal programme.

- At **Dr. Reddy's**, the **Chrysalis** programme for women leaders integrates group coaching, mentoring, training, and project work to foster holistic leadership development.

- The **ILSS Women in Leadership** programme blends cohort-based learning with peer coaching and external mentorship. Designed for mid-career professionals in the development sector, it enables both introspective growth and ecosystem engagement—through layered developmental experiences.

- **Shahi Exports** implements a layered leadership pipeline through programs like **EWASE** (Empowering Women at Shahi Exports), **PULSE** (Promoting Upcoming Leadership at Shahi Exports), and **STITCH** (Shahi Training in Technical & Core Competencies for Holistic Growth), combining mentorship, on-the-job coaching, and peer learning across career stages.

- **HCLTech's women's leadership progression model** spans three tiers—Ignite, Momentum, and Surge Ahead—each a 16-week blended programme combining mentorship, coaching, targeted upskilling, and visibility-building activities.

**Ignite & Momentum:** Early-career technical women receive a mix of group mentorship, skill-based coaching, and peer learning to accelerate readiness for managerial roles.

**Surge Ahead:** Mid-career women undergo one-to-one mentoring and coaching by senior leaders, structured leadership curriculum, and ongoing alumni peer coaching. <sup>42</sup>

In summary, the synergistic integration of developmental models is widely acknowledged in both research and practice as a driver of robust, sustainable leadership pipelines, particularly for women seeking to advance in varied organisational and sectoral context.



# Making it Work: Core Design Principles for High-Impact Programmes

For developmental relationship interventions to deliver meaningful outcomes for both organisations and the women aspiring leadership roles, they must be thoughtfully designed, structured, and executed. Effective programmes go beyond one-off engagements; they are sustained efforts rooted in clarity, intentionality, and inclusivity.

**The following design principles can help organisations create impactful and sustainable women's leadership initiatives:**



## **Set Clear Expectations and Goals**

Establish well-defined objectives from the outset, aligning programme goals with the individual career aspirations of women employees.



## **Structured and Outcome-Driven Framework**

Design the programme with defined timelines, milestones, and measurable outcomes. Regular progress tracking ensures accountability and allows for adjustments to meet the evolving needs of participants.



## **Facilitate Intentional and Compatible Pairings**

Match participants with mentors, coaches, sponsors, or shadowing hosts based on shared values, interests, experiences, and professional goals, rather than solely on seniority or gender. This approach fosters trust and meaningful engagement.



## **Select and Train Qualified, Gender-Sensitive Leaders**

Choose mentors, coaches, sponsors, and hosts who demonstrate strong leadership, collaboration skills and a commitment to supporting women's advancement. Provide training that includes gender sensitivity and awareness of unconscious biases to promote respectful and supportive interactions.



## **Tailor Programmes to Women Specific Needs**

Design interventions that acknowledge and address the systemic and personal barriers women often face—such as navigating organisational politics, managing work-life integration, confronting imposter syndrome, and accessing informal networks. This improves relevance and effectiveness.



## **Build Formal Frameworks Within Specialties**

Design structured programmes—mentoring, coaching, sponsorship, or shadowing, within departments or functions. For example, match senior clinicians and academic leaders with early- and mid-career women doctors based on specialisation, leadership aspirations, and development goals.



### **Leverage Digital Platforms for Connection and Continuity**

Create internal digital communities (WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, Slack) to enable peer learning, case discussions, and knowledge-sharing among women in similar specialties across locations.



### **Recognise and Elevate Success Stories**

Celebrate meaningful journeys across mentoring, coaching, sponsorship, and shadowing in internal communication. Use storytelling to normalise career mobility, strategic decision-making, and the value of mentorship in clinical careers.



### **Provide Comprehensive Support Resources**

Equip both participants and leaders involved with resources such as training materials, discussion guides, and access to wider leadership networks. Ensure participating leaders have protected time and support needed to engage effectively.



### **Incorporate Multiple Touchpoints**

Use a mix of in-person and virtual interactions, as well as individual and group-based sessions depending on the model/s used, to enhance accessibility and engagement.



### **Embed Developmental Relationship Models in HR & Leadership Systems**

Position the selected model/s as a strategic priority within HR policies, linked to leadership development, retention, and gender-inclusive practices, reinforcing its value across the organisation.



### **Leverage Cross-Sector or External Leaders**

Invite experienced leaders from outside the organisation or sector to offer new perspectives. Women in mid-career roles can benefit especially from mentors or coaches who've navigated similar journeys in different contexts.



### **Ensure Psychological Safety –**

Establish clear guidelines on conduct and boundaries within the developmental relationships to foster professionalism and prevent misunderstandings. Allowing women employees to choose the gender of their mentor/coach/host can enhance comfort and trust.



### **Engage Male Leaders as Allies and Sponsors**

Encourage high-status male leaders to actively support and advocate for women's advancement, recognising their role in promoting gender equity within the organisation.

By integrating these principles, organisations can develop leadership development programmes that not only support women leadership but also contribute to a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture.

# Conclusion and Way Forward

---

Developmental relationships serve as a powerful lever for advancing women's leadership across sectors — corporate, social impact and beyond. By integrating them in leadership development programmes, organisations can nurture high-potential talent, strengthen leadership pipelines, and build more inclusive, gender-equitable teams.

Depending on where organisations are on their journey toward gender-diverse and equitable leadership, the following strategies offer practical and effective starting points to embed developmental relationship models as a critical pathway:

## **Human Resources teams can play a pivotal role by championing the following actions:**

### **• Sustain organisation-wide dialogue:**

Facilitate regular conversations across all levels to position mentorship, coaching, sponsorship and shadowing as strategic interventions for gender-intentional leadership, promoting encouraging learning, visibility, and shared accountability.

### **• Institutionalise developmental relationship models through policy:**

Embed these models into talent development frameworks and HR policies to ensure long-term impact and integration into organisational systems. Aligning them with broader DEI strategies can further strengthen their relevance. Notably, many private healthcare organisations are positioning mentorship and coaching for women leaders as a key component of their DEI efforts, often under the broader umbrella of ESG goals.

• **Start with piloting a programme:** Launch small-scale pilots—focusing on a single model or a blended approach—within a department or team to assess interest, gather feedback, and refine the design before rolling out organisation-wide.

### **• Develop formal sponsorship mechanisms:**

Enable senior leaders to actively champion and advocate for emerging women leaders through structured sponsorship initiatives.

### **• Foster peer-led platforms and**

**communities:** Establish women-focussed Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) or mentorship platforms that provide leadership guidance, peer learning, and community-building opportunities.

• **Leverage external expertise:** Partner with organisations like **SheEvolve**, **ILSS**, **Equilead** (for social sector), and others to co-design and deliver programmes tailored to the sectoral needs and leadership goals.

## Private Sector Versus Social Impact Sector Insights

### MENTORSHIP

In the private sector, mentorship and sponsorship are largely internal, company-led; whereas in the social impact sector, mentorship, sponsorship as well as coaching are more ecosystem-led or facilitated by intermediaries. **Gender at Work, India Leaders for Social Sector (ILSS)** and **Equilead** are some intermediaries that run mentorship and leadership development initiatives for women professionals in the sector. Refer to Annex 1 for details of ILSS programme.

In the social impact sector, formal leadership development programmes are fewer for current mid-or senior-level leaders, with more emphasis on supporting younger cohorts, social entrepreneurs, or those transitioning into the sector<sup>38</sup>.

### SPONSORSHIP

### COACHING

In the private sector, coaching is embedded within structured leadership development programs, delivered by certified internal or external coaches. In the social impact sector, coaching is often more ad hoc and ecosystem-facilitated—less institutionalised and rarely organisation-led.<sup>38</sup>

However, there are emerging examples of good practice within the social sector. For instance, Breakthrough Trust has implemented a blended coaching model that combines internal coaching with support from external experts and group leadership sessions. This approach offers tailored support for both emerging and senior leaders and demonstrates that, even without a corporate-style infrastructure, committed civil society organizations can invest in structured coaching to enhance leadership development.

### SPONSORSHIP

In the private sector, sponsorship often involves senior leaders advocating within organisational hierarchies for advancement and visibility. In the development sector, sponsorship may mean enabling access to funding networks, credibility and visibility building across the sector and ecosystem leaders.<sup>38</sup>

# Annex 1: Detailed overview of selected initiatives mentioned in this paper

Example of

## External Mentorship in Social Impact: Indian Leaders for Social Sector (ILSS)

### EMERGING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

- An intensive 11-week programme designed to support the leadership development journeys of emerging women leaders in the social impact sector.

Run in hybrid mode with 4-day residential component, programme includes peer interaction, one-to-one mentorship and opportunity to learn from sector leaders through trainings and lectures.

Example of

## Cross-functional Shadowing: Max Healthcare

### LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

- As part of its Leadership Development Initiative, a unique shadowing-based mentorship model tailored to support women leaders is used.
- High-potential employees, once identified, are allowed to choose a senior leader in the function they aspire to grow into and shadow them over a sustained period—often for several years—until they feel confident to step into similar roles. While the initiative is open to all, it is intentionally designed to support women's progression into leadership.
- This programme reportedly helped increase the representation of women in leadership roles to 28%, with expectations to reach 35% by 2025.

**Participants:** High-potential employees at senior-mid manager level such as the general manager and above levels, preparing them for Vice President or Director-level positions.

Example of

## Mentorship from Pharmaceutical Companies: Lupin, Zydus, Dr Reddy's

### Lupin

#### IMPACT WOMEN'S MENTORING PROGRAMME

- For women employees to seek guidance from senior management to elevate their voices and perspectives in their careers.
- Mentorship skills in select senior leaders (gender neutral) are cultivated through tailored workshops

**Participants:** Women and men, employees in senior management

### Zydus

#### WINGS: WOMEN LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

- Designed for women employees to become more impactful and effective leaders. Provides mentoring to strategic visionary leaders through a 6 month programme

**Participants:** Women employees at and above Assistant Manager level

### Dr Reddy's

#### CHRYSLIS

- Leadership development programme to train high-potential employees for senior roles. Through a 9–12-month journey, employees are provided trainings, workshops, live projects, group coaching and mentorship.

**Participants:** Women in mid-management

Example of

## Mentorship from Private Hospital: Max Healthcare

#### GLOBAL WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN HEALTHCARE PROGRAMME

- Launched recently in 2025 to address barriers to leadership progression by women. Designed specifically to address the under-representation of women in leadership roles within their local healthcare setting. Aims to equip women with the additional skills to confidently take steps to leadership.
- The course offers gender-specific leadership training to empower women. Peer mentorship support groups provide a safe forum to discuss and address barriers, and participants receive support and guidance from trained champions (senior clinicians who are supporting the programme).

**Participants:** Doctors, Nurses, Nutritionists, Physiotherapists, Psychologists and Healthcare Managers with minimum 10 years of experience

---

## Annex 2: Appendix

---

### Part 1: Tagged/Numbered References in the Paper

1. Enhancing Women Leadership in India Inc, Fortune India and SPJIMR, 2024, [https://www.fortuneindia.com/enterprise/fortune-india-spjmr-whitepaper-on-enhancing-women-leadership-in-india-inc-download-here/116212#google\\_vignette](https://www.fortuneindia.com/enterprise/fortune-india-spjmr-whitepaper-on-enhancing-women-leadership-in-india-inc-download-here/116212#google_vignette)
2. An Unbalanced Scale: Exploring the Female Leadership Gap in India's Healthcare Sector, Dasra, 2023, <https://www.dasra.org/individual-resources/136>
3. In Sight - Why Grantmakers in India Need a Gender Lens, Dasra, 2016, <https://www.dasra.org/individual-resources/45>
4. Women in Leadership: Pathways to Progress - Organisational Practices to Bridge the Leadership Gender Gap in the Health Sector, The Udaiti Foundation, 2023, [https://www.dasra.org/pdf/resources/Women%20In%20Leadership%20-%20Pathways%20to%20Progress%20\(MoS\)%20Final%20Report.pdf](https://www.dasra.org/pdf/resources/Women%20In%20Leadership%20-%20Pathways%20to%20Progress%20(MoS)%20Final%20Report.pdf)
5. Advancing Women Through Developmental Relationships, Wendy M. Murphy, Kerry Roberts Gibson, Kathy Kram, 2024, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377607466\\_Advancing\\_women\\_through\\_developmental\\_relationships](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377607466_Advancing_women_through_developmental_relationships)
6. The 70-20-10 Rule for Leadership Development, Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), 2025, <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/70-20-10-rule/>, Accessed 2025
7. Women Need Mentors Now More Than Ever, Forbes, 2021 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andiekramer/2021/07/14/women-need-mentors-now-more-than-ever/>, Accessed 2025
8. Customer Case Study - Skyrocketing retention rates by connecting employees with mentors, Together Platform, <https://www.togetherplatform.com/case-studies/randstad>, Accessed in 2025
9. Breaking Barriers: The Critical Role of Executive Sponsorship for Women in Corporate Leadership, Wequal, <https://wequal.com/insight/breaking-barriers-sponsorship-for-women-in-corporate-leadership/>, Accessed 2025
10. What Value Do Senior Women & Their Organisations Get from Coaching? Praesta Insights via Medium, 2023, <https://medium.com/praesta-insights/what-value-do-senior-women-their-organisations-get-from-coaching-56d5df7193b9>, Accessed 2025
11. Fostering Future Leaders: The Impact of Mentorship on Women in Leadership Journal of Petroleum Technology, <https://jpt.spe.org/fostering-future-leaders-the-impact-of-mentorship-on-women-in-leadership>, Accessed 2025
12. Association for Talent Development (ATD). 2017. Mentoring Matters: Developing Talent with Formal Mentoring Programs. (Cited in: Two Mentor, 2023). <https://www.twomentor.com/want-an-88-boost-in-productivity-say-yes-to-mentoring-your-managers/>

- 
13. ICF Global Coaching Client Study, Executive Summary, International Coaching Federation, 2009, <https://researchportal.coachingfederation.org/Document/Pdf/190.pdf>
14. Women's Leadership in the Development Sector, India Leaders for Social Sector, 2022, [https://indialeadersforsocialsector.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ILSS\\_WLP\\_251022\\_print-new.pdf](https://indialeadersforsocialsector.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ILSS_WLP_251022_print-new.pdf)
15. Coaching Trends 2023 Report, CoachHub, 2022, <https://www.coachhub.com/app/uploads/2022/09/Coaching-Trends23-Report.pdf>
16. How to Be an Effective Sponsor, LeadersEdge, <https://www.leadersedge.com/brokerage-ops/how-to-be-an-effective-sponsor>, Accessed 2025
17. Job Shadowing, Mentorink, <https://www.mentorink.com/blog/job-shadowing/>, Accessed 2025
18. A 7-Step Guide to Building a Successful Job Shadowing Program, Together Platform,

<https://www.togetherplatform.com/blog/a-7-step-guide-to-building-a-successful-job-shadowing-program>,

19. Job Shadowing, Shiftbase, <https://www.shiftbase.com/glossary/job-shadowing>, Accessed 2025
20. Job Shadowing, New South Wales Department of Education (School Leadership Institute), <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/school-leadership-institute/research/shadowing>, Accessed 2025
21. Early Career Nurses' Experiences of Engaging in a Leadership Role in Hospital Settings, Justine Jeanelle Ting, Yolanda Babenko-Mould, Anna Garnett, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC11308292/>, Accessed 2025
22. Mentoring and coaching: Building the next generation of leaders, Forbes, 2023, Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2023/05/30/mentoring-and-coaching-building-the-next-generation-of-leaders/>, Accessed 2025

23. How Women in Tech Can Move Past the Middle to Become Future Tech Leaders, Boston Consulting Group, 2023, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/how-women-can-move-past-middle-to-become-future-tech-leaders?>

---

## Part 2: Other References Used in the Paper

25. Unpacking Gender- Equitable Leadership in Organisations: Insights and Strategies, Equilead, 2025, <https://wiki.equilead.org/books/unpacking-gender-equitable-leadership-in-organisations-insights-and-strategies>
26. Diversity Matters Even More, McKinsey, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-matters-even-more-the-case-for-holistic-impact>
27. New Research Diversity + Inclusion = Better Decision Making At Work, Forbes, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriklarson/2017/09/21/new-research-diversity-inclusion-better-decision-making-at-work/>, Accessed in 2025



---

28. Women Leadership in Corporate India 2024 Report, KPMG-AIMA, 2024, <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/in/pdf/2024/04/women-leadership-in-corporate-india-2024.pdf>

29. Women's Leadership in the Development Sector, Arthan, 2020, <https://www.arthansocialforum.org/wlids-report>

30. Improve Workplace Culture With A Strong Mentoring Program, Forbes, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nazbeheshti/2019/01/23/improve-workplace-culture-with-a-strong-mentoring-program/?sh=4f53780f76b5>, Accessed in 2025

31. How becoming a mentor can boost your career, Forbes, 2011, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lisaquast/2011/10/31/how-becoming-a-mentor-can-boost-your-career/#31204bee5f57>, Accessed in 2025

32. KPMG Women's Leadership Study – Moving Women Forward in Leadership Roles, KPMG, 2015, <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/ph/pdf/ThoughtLeadershipPublications/KPMGWomensLeadershipStudy.pdf>

---

33. Women's Empowerment Principles - Mentoring in the Workplace, UN Women, 2020, [https://www.weps.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/WEPs\\_GUIDANCE\\_Mentoring\\_in\\_the\\_Workplace\\_0.pdf](https://www.weps.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/WEPs_GUIDANCE_Mentoring_in_the_Workplace_0.pdf)

34. Diversity and Inclusion, Dr Reddy's, <https://careers.drreddys.com/diversity-inclusion>, Accessed 2025

35. The Emerging Women's Leadership Programme, India Leaders for Social Sector, <https://indialeadersforsocialsector.com/ilss-emerging-womens-leadership-program/>, Accessed 2025

36. Job Shadowing Programs Can Improve Employee Retention and Support Career Advancement: New Guide from McLean & Company, McLean & Company via PR 37. Newswire, 2024, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/job-shadowing-programs-can-improve-employee-retention-and-support-career-advancement-new-guide-from-mclean--company-302096206.html>

---

38. Building the Bench at Indian NGOs: Investing to Fill the Leadership Development Gap , Bridgespan Group, 2017, <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/nonprofit-leadership/leadership-development-at-indian-ngos>

39. Social Impact Multipliers: Leadership Development for Indian Social Sector, Indian School of Development Management & Sattva Consulting, 2018, <https://www.csrmandate.org/isdm-releases-social-impact-multipliers-report/>

40. Human Capital, Lupin, <https://www.lupin.com/esg-report/human-capital.php>, Accessed 2025

41. ESG Report, FY 2022-23, Zydus Life Sciences, <https://www.zyduslife.com/public/pdf/ESG-Report-Zydus-Lifesciences-Limited-2022-23.pdf>, Accessed 2025

42. HCLTech Women's Leadership Framework, 2025, HCLTech, <https://backend.udaiti.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/HCLTech.pdf?>, Accessed 2025



## About Dasra:

For 25 years, **Dasra** has driven systemic change through strategic giving, partnerships and community-led solutions- building equity not just as a goal- but as a way forward. Dasra acts as a system orchestrator- bringing together diverse stakeholders and strengthening grassroot organizations by building:

**1. Collaborative funds:** Bringing together stakeholders, sectors and geographies on shared platforms to bolster collective action.

**2. Philanthropy Infrastructure:** Building momentum around domestic philanthropy by unlocking capital to influence practices and narratives for systems change.

**3. Philanthropy Engagement:** Catalyzing funds through tailored giving advisory, to unlock deeper and lasting impact.

**4. Capability Centres:** Strengthening civil society ecosystem by offering targeted support in research, technology, leadership development, and story telling.



[www.dasra.org](http://www.dasra.org) | To know more, reach out to us at [wil@dasra.org](mailto:wil@dasra.org)