



A Climate Asia & Arthan Foundation Initiative



Unpacking Gender-Equitable Leadership in Organisations

INSIGHTS AND STRATEGIES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the organisation leaders and team members who generously shared their data and insights on workplace practices and their experiences in fostering inclusive and gender-equitable workplaces. Your contributions have been invaluable to this report.

We would like to express our appreciation to the dedicated team members whose efforts brought this report to life. Data analysis was conducted by Nidhi Tewari, Pritha Chakraborty, and Devleena Chatterji. The report was written by this team, along with Debasmita Sasmal, Aiswarya Ananthapadmanabhan, Divya Hariharan, Vatsala Singh, and Paati Purohit. Thoughtful reviews and feedback were provided by Aiswarya Ananthapadmanabhan, Divya Hariharan, and Meghana Rao, while communications support was handled by Saili Chavan and Danish Raza. The report's design was brought to life by Aspire Design, New Delhi.

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This report is a true collective effort, and we are sincerely thankful to everyone who contributed their time, expertise, and enthusiasm to make it possible.

Team EquiLead

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	i
Foreword	v
Executive Summary	vii
EquiLead – An Overview	ix
Background of the Study	1
Women’s Leadership in Social Impact Organisations of India	11
Gender Integration at Workplace	26
DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) at Workplace	39
Recommendations	48
Way Forward	54
Annexure	55

FOREWORD

A significant part of our life is spent at work. Workplaces define us. They define our experiences; they also define our work. In light of this, building inclusive workplaces has been the cornerstone of our work at EquiLead. Enabling equity in leadership also demands that we enable workplaces to be inclusive and gender equitable in perspective, policy and practice.

Before embarking upon this mammoth task of building and facilitating inclusive workplaces, we launched a landscaping study encompassing organisations in the impact sector across philanthropy, research, advocacy, community building in the impact sector including but not limited to these sectors. The first phase of the study, conducted between December 2022 and June 2023, covered a sample of 70 organisations. To ensure broader diversity and representation, a second phase was conducted from August to October 2024, expanding the sample to 128 organisations. This report presents the consolidated findings from both phases of the study.

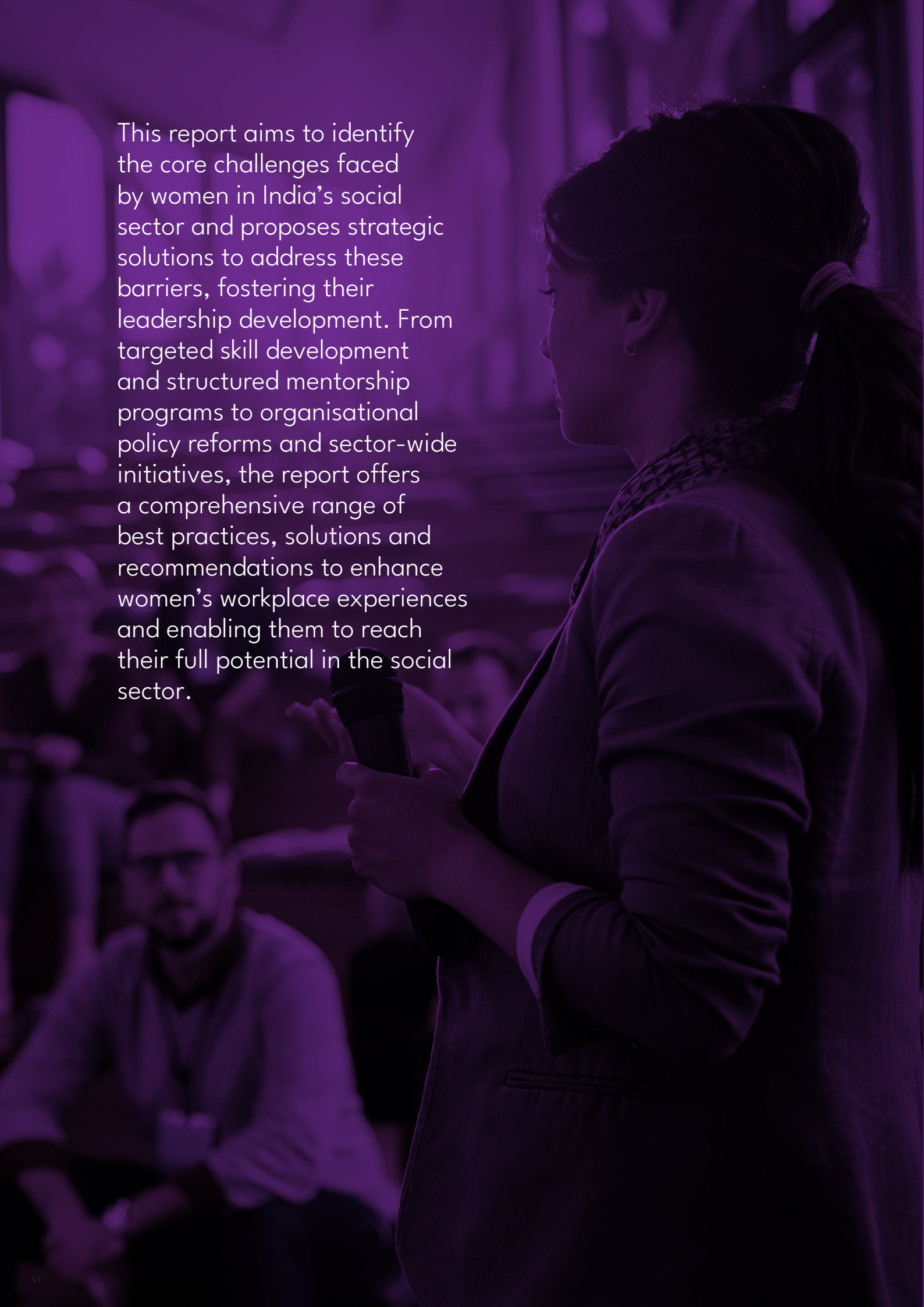
The intent was to deep dive into understanding:

- Gender intentional strategies (if any) that are being integrated into organisational culture
- Challenges organisations face in their endeavours of promoting Women's leadership and fostering Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)
- Effective gender policies and best practices

This study is the result of collaborative, candid dialogues with organisations entrusting us with sensitive information, extensive secondary research, surveys as well as learnings from our various interventions at EquiLead. The study serves as an anchor for us, informing and guiding our interventions and thinking.

We hope this study catalyses more strategic thinking, collaboration, and philanthropic focus on building inclusive workplaces. It aims to serve as a guide, translating into actionable policies and practices that help organisations create ecosystems that support women's growth. Additionally, the study advocates for bringing underrepresented voices to the decision-making table to ensure that programmes are both equitable and thoughtfully designed to meet the needs of diverse demographics.

Satyam Vyas and Anchal Kakkar (Founding Team, EquiLead)

A woman with dark hair tied in a ponytail, wearing a grey blazer, is shown in profile from the waist up, holding a microphone and speaking. She is standing in front of a blurred audience of people seated in rows. The entire image has a purple color overlay.

This report aims to identify the core challenges faced by women in India's social sector and proposes strategic solutions to address these barriers, fostering their leadership development. From targeted skill development and structured mentorship programs to organisational policy reforms and sector-wide initiatives, the report offers a comprehensive range of best practices, solutions and recommendations to enhance women's workplace experiences and enabling them to reach their full potential in the social sector.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

128

Total participating
organisations

Key Areas of Inquiry

- ➔ Women's Leadership
- ➔ Gender Integration
- ➔ Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging

Key Objectives

- ➔ To gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of women in professional workspaces, including challenges related to leadership, discrimination, and career growth.
- ➔ To explore and define best practices for creating a virtual platform that connects women job-seekers with organisations actively looking to improve gender representation in their workforce.
- ➔ To develop resource materials and policy guidelines that support organisations in creating gender-inclusive work environments, ensuring compliance with global best practices and legal frameworks.
- ➔ To assess barriers to gender integration in different organisational structures and recommend ways to improve equity through policy interventions, training, and cultural shifts.

Key Insights

- ➔ Many organisations remain hesitant to openly discuss their stance on gender integration, indicating a lack of clarity or confidence in implementing gender-focused initiatives.
- ➔ Men in leadership positions were found to be less vocal about gender issues and exhibited low levels of awareness about workplace policies addressing gender discrimination, maternity benefits, and affirmative action. This suggests a need for targeted awareness programs for male decision-makers.
- ➔ Even among organisations that primarily work with women, many lack fundamental policies such as the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) policy or maternity leave benefits, highlighting significant gaps in gender-focused workplace protections.
- ➔ The lack of structured DEI initiatives suggests that while organisations may express commitment to gender equity, they often do not translate these intentions into concrete actions such as mentorship programs, leadership development for women, or flexible work arrangements.

Key Statistics

- ➔ 43% of organisations do not have any affirmative action policy for women or gender minorities, indicating a lack of structured efforts to promote inclusivity and gender balance in the workplace.
- ➔ 50% of organisations do not conduct any DEI-focused capacity-building or training sessions, which reflects an inadequate commitment to educating employees and leadership about gender equity and inclusion.
- ➔ 38% of organisations do not provide travel assistance for women after working hours, potentially making it unsafe for women employees to commute, especially in high-risk areas or night shifts.
- ➔ 31% of organisations are led by women, showing a gender leadership gap despite increasing discussions around women's representation in leadership roles.

EquiLead

An Overview

In 2020, Arthan, in collaboration with The Rockefeller Foundation, embarked on a journey to delve deep into the topic of Women's Leadership in the Development Sector (WLIDS).

This led to a study chronicling case studies of 50+ women leaders across the impact sector, including NGOs, CSR foundations, research institutes, intermediaries, funding organisations and social enterprises. The report also documented findings from a survey filled by 100+ development sector professionals.

This led to start of the 'Women at Work' initiative to understand the gaps as discovered in the report and create solutions to address these gaps. Now rebranded as EquiLead, supported by Climate Asia Inc. and Arthan Foundation, this initiative is committed to:

- ➔ 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.
- ➔ Enabling organisations to make their workplaces become inclusive and gender equitable in perspective, policy and practice.

Anchored in the values of “Equity” and “Leadership”, we envision an ecosystem where women's leadership will empower social impact focused institutions to become gender-just organisations of the future: where workplaces, leadership pathways and institutional intent and structures will be gender intentional, inclusive and equitable.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Why is this Study Important

Gender diversity is a key driver of productivity, innovation, and employee retention, yet the current landscape reveals a significant gap. Despite higher educational attainment and a growing Indian economy, a substantial number of urban women professionals are exiting the workforce. Research by the Indian Leaders for Social Sector (ILSS) highlights that even when women do participate in the workforce, they encounter environments that are unequal and predominantly structured for men to succeed. This deep-seated inequality calls for a deeper exploration of the multifaceted barriers that hinder women's leadership and advancement, particularly in the social sector.

Acknowledging the importance of gender integration and the role of organisations in advancing women's leadership, EquiLead undertook a rigorous landscaping study, "Navigating Women's Leadership, Gender Integration and DEI in the Impact Sector." The first phase, conducted between December 2022 and June 2023, involved a sample of 70 organisations. To ensure broader diversity and representation, a second phase was conducted from August to October 2024, expanding the sample to 128 organisations. This report presents the consolidated findings from both phases of the study.

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128
organisations

According to a survey conducted by Dasra, which included 328 organisations in 2015, women make up 53% of the total workforce in the social sector. This statistic indicates that women form the majority of employees in this sector. However, despite their significant representation in the workforce, leadership and managerial positions are still predominantly occupied by men.

81%

of Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs) in the sector are led by men. This suggests that decision-making and strategic roles are largely dominated by male leaders, leaving fewer opportunities for women to rise to top leadership positions.

Only
34%

of organisations in the sector have women in managerial roles, highlighting a gender disparity in leadership despite their majority presence in the workforce.

Areas of Inquiry and Research Objectives



To understand if and how are gender intentional strategies and processes being integrated into organisational culture and processes.



To study the practices and challenges faced by organisations in their endeavours of integrating gender, promoting women's leadership and fostering DEI and to inform creation of a platform that will address these gaps.

To understand the challenges and opportunities for women's growth and leadership in the social impact sector.



To track the nature of effective gender policies and practices that are prioritised, document best practices as well as identify needs for building capacities within organisations.



CONSIDERATIONS

These are the thematic lenses that were taken into account for the purpose of this study. Understanding these considerations provides a contextual perspective to the reader, ensuring clarity on the methodology and approach used in gathering and analyzing data.

1

Purposive Sampling Technique

- i. The study employed a purposive sampling technique, meaning that the selection of participants was intentional rather than random.
- ii. The sample was carefully curated by leveraging EquiLead's networks in the social impact sector to ensure relevant and meaningful insights.
- iii. This approach allowed for a more targeted understanding of gender-related challenges and leadership trends in the sector.

2

Analytical Approach Using Organisational Archetypes

- i. To simplify the analysis and presentation of findings, organisations were classified into different archetypes based on factors such as:
 - Thematic areas of operation (e.g., education, healthcare, policy advocacy).
 - Organisation size (small, medium, large).
 - Types of organisations (non-profits, social enterprises, grassroots initiatives, research institutions).
- ii. By categorising organisations into these groups, the study was able to highlight patterns and trends more effectively across different kinds of entities in the social impact sector.

3

Qualitative Data Collection Through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

- i. The study gathered insights using Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with senior leaders in the social impact sector.
- ii. Interviewees included:
 - Senior leadership of social impact organisations, providing high-level perspectives on gender dynamics and organisational policies.
 - Mid to senior-level women leaders, offering firsthand experiences regarding career growth, leadership challenges, and opportunities.
 - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) experts, contributing insights on gender policies, workplace inclusivity, and best practices.
 - Organisational Development (OD) policy makers, who influence structural and strategic decisions within organisations.

4

Use of Social Media and Hybrid Research Approach

- i. Social media platforms played a key role in connecting with potential interviewees, allowing for a wider and more diverse pool of respondents beyond traditional outreach methods.
- ii. The research was conducted through a hybrid approach, including both online and in-person interviews, ensuring flexibility and a broader reach.
- iii. This method also facilitated engagement with individuals from different geographical locations, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in the sector.

Limitations of the Study



Some organisations politely declined from participating in the study citing time constraints, applicability of the survey and its objective to their work among other reasons.



Language was a barrier in some grassroots organisations, which have regional languages as their first language.



The study recognises that gender is not binary. However, the scope of this research is limited to women's leadership, recognising the unique experiences and challenges faced by women in leadership positions.



The intricate and expansive concept of women's leadership encompasses a wide range of definitions. However, our research is specifically focused on mid and senior level women leaders within the social impact sector.



Sampling Framework

A total of 128 organisations participated in this study.

To gather insights, we provided organisations with two options: they could either fill out a detailed survey about their organisation or help us engage in a one-on-one discussion with a senior leader.

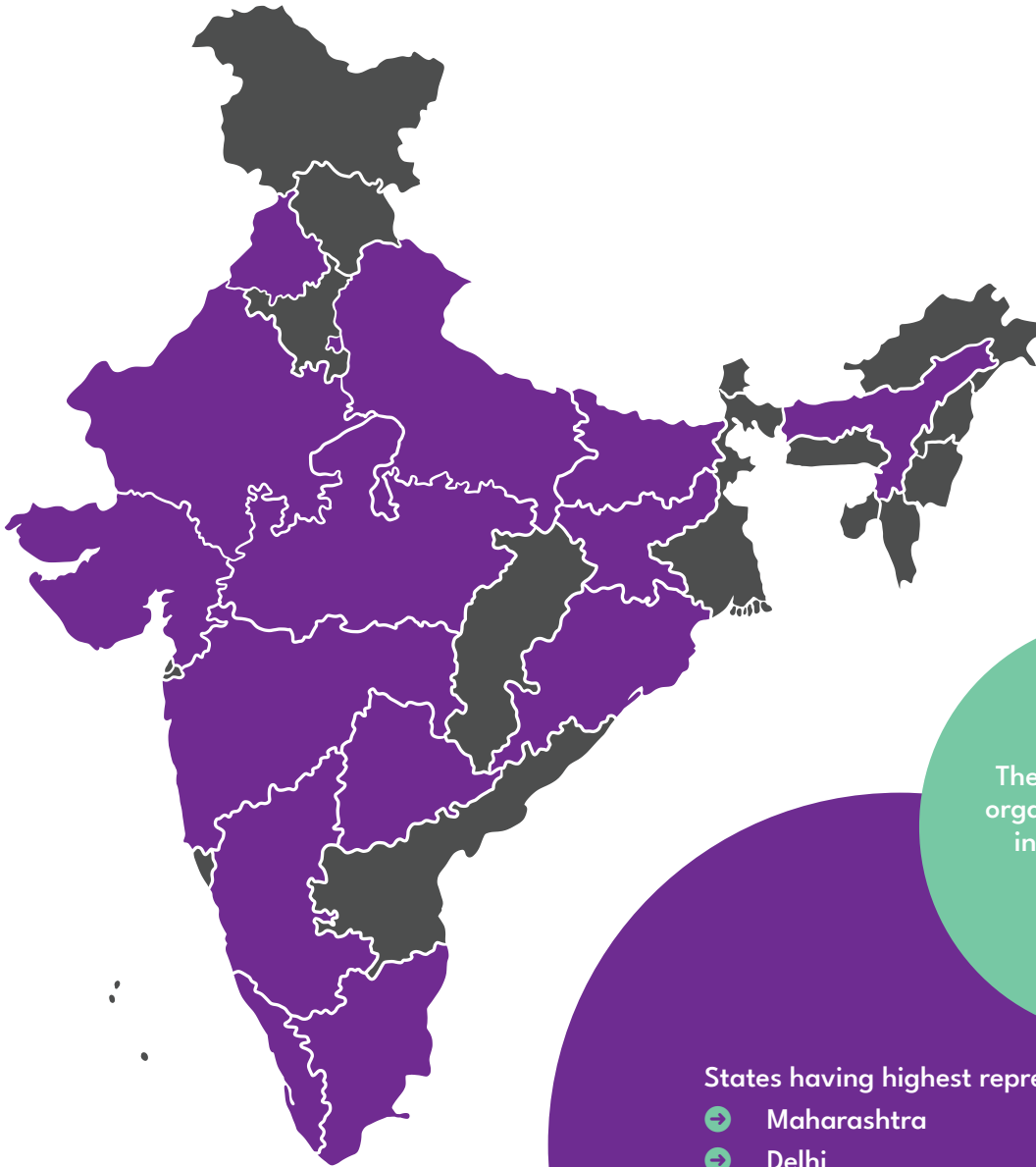
65 organisations chose to complete the survey, providing structured responses about their organisational policies, practices, and gender dynamics.

58 senior leaders from different organisations opted for in-depth, one-on-one conversations, allowing us to capture qualitative insights and leadership perspectives on gender integration.

Additionally, we conducted discussions with 5 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion **(DEI) experts**, who provided critical analysis and contextual expertise to enhance our understanding of DEI practices in India's social sector.

By combining these perspectives, the study presents a comprehensive view of gender policies, leadership trends, and inclusivity efforts across diverse organisations in the sector.

GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF SURVEYED ORGANISATIONS



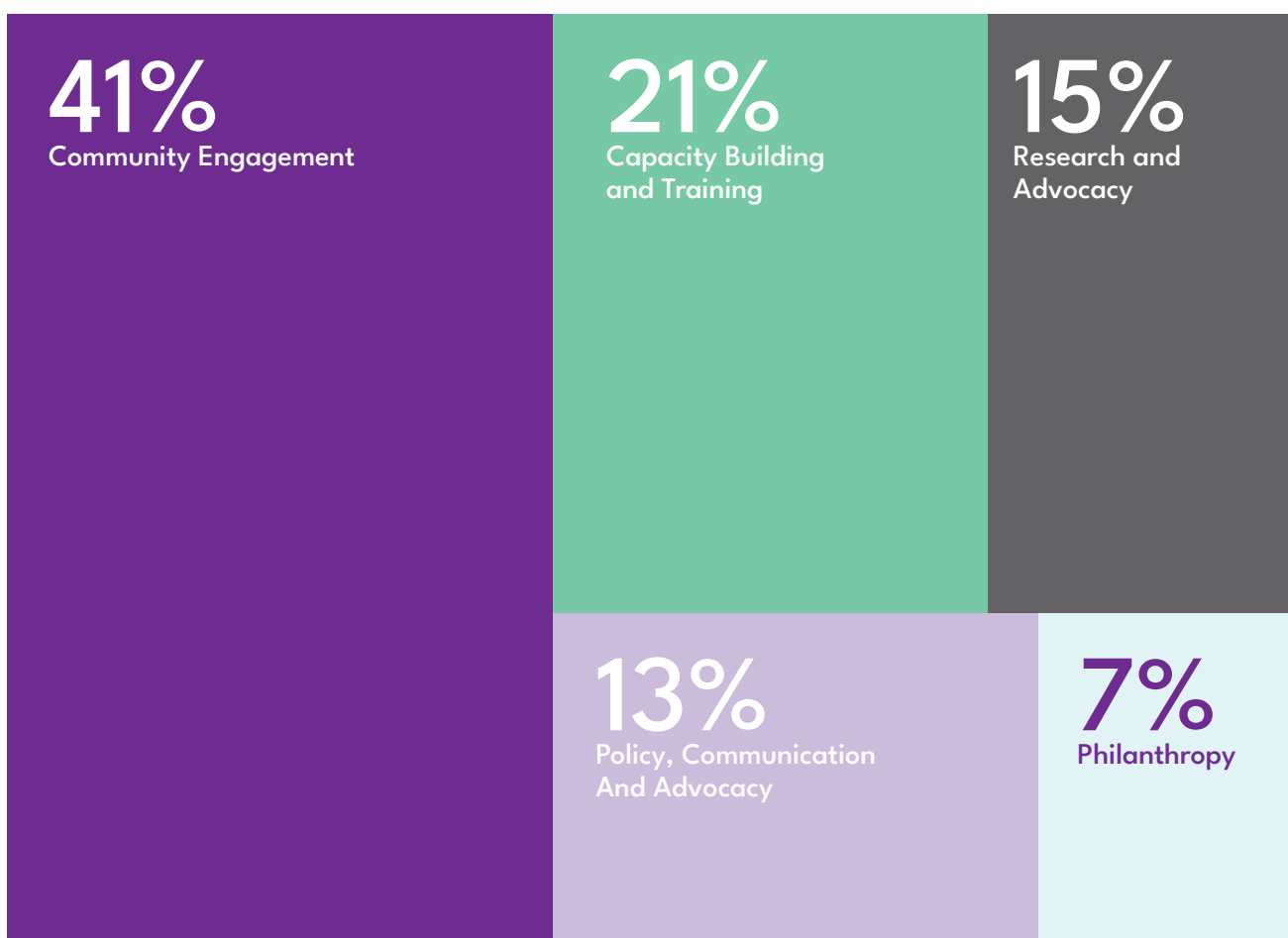
The sample consists of organisations operating in 15 states of India highlighted.

States having highest representation:

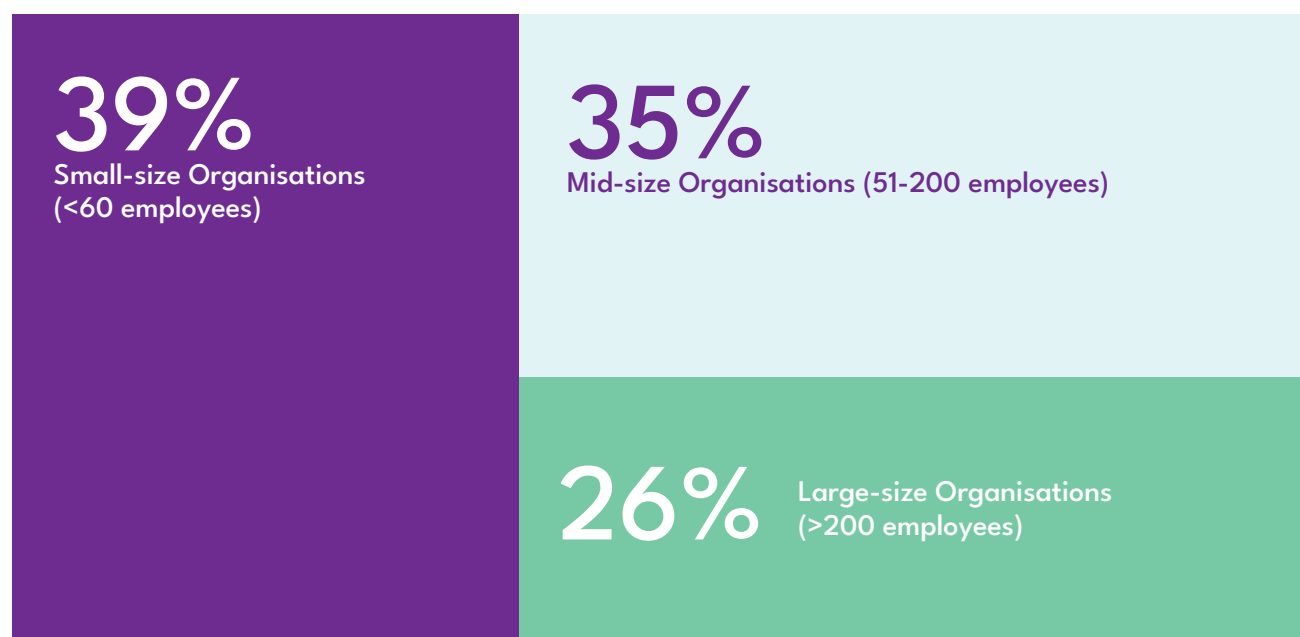
- Maharashtra
- Delhi
- Uttar Pradesh
- Bihar
- Karnataka

Descriptive Details of the Sample

Types of Organisations covered and Thematic Areas of Operation



Organisation-Size Division



Organisational Archetypes

Based on our sample, we identified distinct organisational archetypes that define the different approaches organisations take to create social impact. These archetypes help categorize organisations based on their core functions, strategies, and methods of engagement in the social sector. This also helps in adding further nuances to our data analysis on gender integration.

Types of Organisations covered and Thematic Areas of Operation

1. Community Engagement

Organisations in this category work directly with community members to identify and address social issues through collective action. Their focus is on:

- Facilitation and education to empower communities.
- Representation and advocacy to ensure that marginalised voices are heard.
- Resource mobilisation to support community-led initiatives.
- These organisations emphasise on-the-ground implementation and prioritize grassroots impact.

2. Capacity Building and Training

This approach involves working with diverse stakeholders, including communities, organisations, and individuals, to enhance skills and organisational performance. Key activities include:

- Training programs aimed at skill development.
- Workshops and mentorship initiatives to strengthen organisational structures.
- Support for leadership and professional growth within the sector.
- By elevating existing capacities, these organisations help stakeholders become more effective change-makers.

3. Research and Advocacy

These organisations contribute to the social sector by generating evidence-based insights through:

- Extensive research and data collection on social policies and impact trends.
- Stakeholder communication and knowledge sharing to influence decision-making.
- Strategic partnerships to advocate for systemic change.
- By producing expansive literature and analysis, these organisations shape policy debates and inform social sector interventions.

4. Policy, Communications, and Advocacy

Organisations in this archetype focus on policy development and public awareness by:

- Curating policies that promote sustainable social impact.
- Influencing policy decisions by engaging with lawmakers and institutions.
- Using diverse communication channels (media, campaigns, reports) to inform and educate.
- Some organisations also serve as advocacy platforms, amplifying issues and mobilising public support for change.

5. Philanthropy

Philanthropic foundations play a crucial role in financially supporting social initiatives. Their engagement includes:

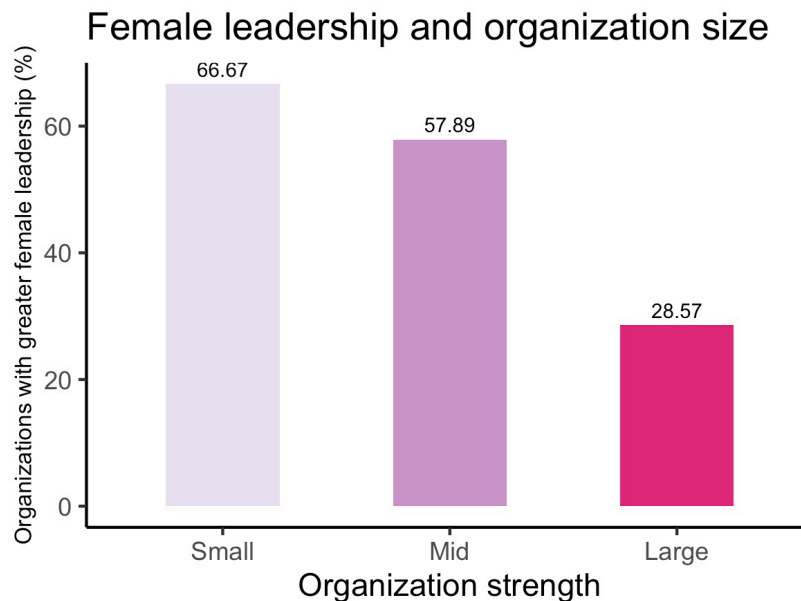
- Providing grants and funding to nonprofit organisations and social enterprises.
- Establishing independent programs to drive social change.
- Acting as long-term supporters for specific causes through strategic giving.
- These organisations often set the agenda for sustainable impact by investing in innovative and scalable solutions.





WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL IMPACT ORGANISATIONS OF INDIA

Percentage of Women in Leadership- by organisation size



When we look at female leadership by size of the organisation type, we come across some very interesting trends. In our study too, we find that women tend to hold a significantly higher proportion of leadership roles, in smaller organisations while men dominate leadership roles in larger organisations. This trend suggests that smaller organisations, such as startups, grassroots initiatives, and community-based organisations, may provide more opportunities for women to lead. These environments are often more flexible, inclusive, and mission-driven, allowing women to take on leadership positions without facing the traditional barriers found in larger corporate structures.

However, as organisation size increases—progressing from mid-sized to large organisations—the percentage of female leadership declines, while the representation of male leaders rises. In larger firms, the presence of male leadership tends to reach or exceed 50%, indicating a shift towards more male-dominated leadership structures. This trend can be attributed to several factors, including corporate hierarchies, gender biases in promotions, lack of mentorship for women at higher levels, and systemic challenges in work-life balance that disproportionately affect women.

In larger firms, the presence of male leadership tends to reach or exceed 50%, indicating a shift towards more male-dominated leadership structures

The decline in female leadership in larger organisations highlights the need for stronger policies on gender diversity, mentorship programs, leadership training for women, and inclusive workplace cultures to ensure that women can continue advancing into senior roles as organisations scale.

The data finding aligns with extensive research on women's leadership in the corporate sector. One key explanation is the leaky pipeline phenomenon, as discussed by Eagly & Carli (2007) in "Through the Labyrinth". Women enter the workforce in large numbers but face multiple structural barriers, such as bias in promotions, lack of sponsorship, and greater work-life balance challenges, leading to their gradual decline in leadership roles as organisations grow. In contrast, smaller organisations, which often have flatter structures and collaborative cultures, provide women with greater opportunities to lead.

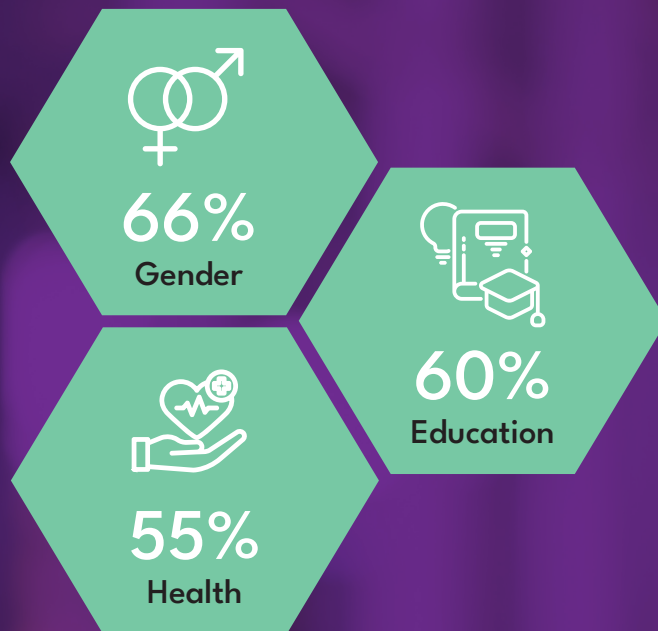
Another crucial factor is the glass ceiling effect, first described by Morrison, White, & Van Velsor (1987), which refers to the invisible barriers preventing women from reaching top executive positions. Research by Catalyst (2020) and McKinsey & Company's "Women in the Workplace" report (2023) reveals that as firms grow, leadership roles become more centralised, and the power structures tend to favor men. Larger organisations tend to reinforce existing male-dominated networks, making it more difficult for women to access top leadership positions. This explains why, in large corporations, male leadership often

exceeds 50%, whereas smaller organisations are more likely to have women in decision-making roles.

The gendered perception of leadership further contributes to this disparity. A meta-analysis by Koenig et al. (2011) in *Psychological Bulletin* found that leadership is often associated with traditionally "male" traits, such as assertiveness, dominance, and competitiveness. In contrast, women are stereotyped as being more communal, empathetic, and cooperative. In small organisations, leadership is often more participatory and inclusive, allowing women to thrive. However, in larger firms, where leadership is perceived through a more masculine lens, women face implicit biases that make it harder for them to rise to senior positions.

Additionally, larger organisations often have fewer women-friendly policies at the senior level, further discouraging female leadership. Research by Hewlett & Luce (2005) highlights how longer work hours, frequent travel, and greater performance scrutiny in high-level roles make it more difficult for women—especially those managing family responsibilities—to remain in leadership positions. Ibarra, Carter, & Silva (2010) further emphasize the lack of sponsorship for women in corporate settings, which is crucial for career progression. In smaller organisations, where leadership pipelines are less rigid and mentorship and sponsorship opportunities are more accessible, women are more likely to rise to leadership positions.

Percentage of Women Representation in Leadership - by Thematic Area Archetype



Examining the percentage of women in leadership across various thematic areas, we see the highest representation in the Gender thematic area (66%), where organisations primarily focus on gender rights, gender-based violence (GBV), gender mainstreaming, and leadership development. This highlights the significant role women play in advocating for gender-related issues.

Following closely, the Education sector (60%) and Health sector (55%), also show a strong presence of women in leadership. Their influence is evident in shaping educational policies and reforms, driving healthcare initiatives, and leading community-centered development efforts.

Overall, women hold substantial leadership roles across these sectors, with an estimated 50-70% representation in senior leadership positions. This data reflects their growing impact in social development, education, healthcare, and gender rights advocacy.

As we move into Community Engagement, Research Advocacy, and Capacity Building organisations, the number of women in leadership roles decreases. Only 42% of Community Engagement organisations have female-dominated leadership (where women hold more than 50-70% of leadership positions), and the numbers are even lower for Research and Advocacy organisations. This means that female leadership becomes less common in these sectors. When we explored the reasons for this we learnt that:

In Community based organisations, many women leaders juggle caregiving responsibilities along with their professional roles. This dual burden can limit their capacity to fully engage in leadership development opportunities or strategic planning. Specifically, in organisations working at the grassroots, barriers to women's leadership exist primarily due to:

- **Cultural Resistance:** In many grassroots settings, especially in rural or conservative areas, traditional gender roles can create resistance to women taking on leadership positions. This often requires women leaders to overcome deep-rooted cultural norms and biases.
- **Safety and Security Concerns:** Grassroots work, especially in areas facing social unrest, can pose safety risks. Women leaders might face unique security concerns, especially when working on sensitive issues like gender rights or in conflict zones.
- **Balancing Community Expectations:** Women leaders often have to navigate expectations from their communities, balancing leadership roles with the community's perception of gender roles, which can limit their influence and decision-making autonomy.



42% OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ORGANISATIONS HAVE A WOMAN DOMINANT* LEADERSHIP.

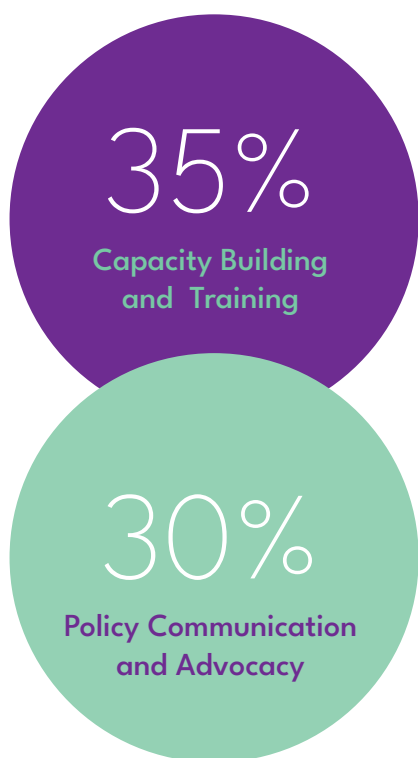
*About 50-70%

Research Organisations

Lack of Mentorship and Role Models: Women in research leadership roles often lack access to female mentors or role models who can guide them through their careers. This can result in fewer opportunities for women to ascend to leadership positions.



30% OF RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY ORGANISATIONS HAVE WOMAN DOMINANT LEADERSHIP.



28% CBT, 16% PCA organisations have Woman Dominant Leadership

In Policy Advocacy Organisations, barriers to women's leadership appear in the form of:

- **Visibility and Influence:** Policy advocacy requires significant visibility and the ability to influence key decision-makers. Women leaders often face challenges in gaining access to influential networks and forums, which are still male-dominated in many sectors.
- **Gender Bias in Public Speaking and Leadership Style:** Women leaders in policy advocacy may be scrutinised more harshly for their public speaking, decision-making, and leadership style compared to their male counterparts. They may need to work harder to establish credibility and authority.
- **Underrepresentation in Decision-Making Bodies:** Women are often underrepresented in the government and decision-making bodies they need to advocate to. This lack of representation makes it more difficult for women leaders to push for policies that align with gender inclusion and equity.

- **Leadership Stereotypes in Fundraising:** Women leaders in philanthropy may be expected to take on nurturing roles, focusing on “soft” issues like education or health, while male leaders are often seen as more suited for high-profile or strategic areas like finance or innovation. This can limit women's influence over the larger strategic direction of philanthropic efforts.
- **Representation and Institutional Barriers:** Women in philanthropy face several specific challenges, including the stereotype that undermines their competence in financial decision-making, which can diminish their authority and credibility when advocating for funding. Additionally, high-level donor networks are predominantly male-dominated, making it difficult for women to establish connections and influence critical funding decisions. Gender biases in funding allocations often lead to unequal distribution of resources, with initiatives led by women or focused on women's issues receiving less financial support. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within philanthropic organisations limits their ability to shape funding priorities and strategies. Finally, efforts to promote gender equity in funding frequently encounter resistance, particularly in traditional philanthropic circles, hindering progress toward more inclusive practices in philanthropy.

20%

PHILANTHROPY ORGANISATIONS HAVE WOMAN DOMINANT LEADERSHIP

“The concept of women’s funds has arisen out of a deep recognition that philanthropy can be gender-blind. It is our responsibility to make resources more accessible to organisations and initiatives, which are transforming structures of power. We are very committed to this vision of a world where women and girls and gender non-binary people are able to claim resources which are needed to transform their lives”

- Director of a Philanthropic Organisation



ONLY

30% 91%

ORGANISATIONS
HAVE A MAJORITY
WOMEN
REPRESENTATION IN
THEIR LEADERSHIP
POSITIONS.

ORGANISATIONS
SPECIFICALLY HIRE OR
PROMOTE WOMEN
FOR OPENINGS IN
LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Despite the growing recognition of gender equality in the workplace, and a notable 91% of organisations actively working to hire and promote more women, the results show that progress is still slow and uneven. While it's heartening that the number of initiatives supporting gender balance is increasing, it underscores how deeply ingrained systemic barriers still exist.

The fact that only 30% of organisations have succeeded in achieving a majority representation of women in leadership positions suggests that while the conversation around gender equity is gaining momentum, the practical changes required to shift the leadership landscape are complex.

Several factors contribute to this gradual pace of change:

- ➔ **Cultural and Structural Barriers:** Many organisations, even those committed to gender parity, still operate under longstanding cultural norms and structural obstacles that favor male leadership. These include unconscious biases in hiring, performance evaluations, and promotion decisions, as well as outdated perceptions about women's roles in high-stakes, executive positions.
- ➔ **Pipeline Problems:** There's often a bottleneck at the middle management level, where fewer women than men are rising through the ranks. This is partly due to the ongoing challenges women face in balancing professional aspirations with family responsibilities, which are still more heavily placed on women than men in many cases. Until this pipeline issue is addressed with robust support systems (like mentorship, flexible work options, and proactive career development), it will remain difficult to achieve gender parity in leadership.
- ➔ **Tokenism vs. Substantive Change:** Some organisations may prioritize hiring women for visible roles but still lack the policies or organisational culture that empower them to



thrive once they're in those positions. Women may be promoted into leadership roles, but without the right institutional support, they may not have the same decision-making power or resources as their male counterparts, potentially stalling their ability to make a significant impact.

- ➔ **The "Slow and Steady" Change:** Change on this scale is inherently slow, particularly when it involves altering the power dynamics within organisations that have been established over decades (or even centuries). This isn't a matter of a few years of concerted effort; rather, it's a long-term project that requires the evolution of not just policies but also the overall culture of businesses, industries, and even broader societal norms.
- ➔ **Measuring Success Beyond Numbers:** Achieving "majority representation" is just one step in the journey towards equity. Success should also be measured by how well women are integrated into leadership roles—do they have real influence? Are they making decisions that shape the direction of the organisation? If not, organisations may be failing to create truly equitable environments, even if the numbers are technically balanced.

While we are seeing more intentional efforts to recruit and retain women, achieving real gender equity in leadership will require long-term commitment to cultural, institutional, and societal shifts. Only then will we see more than just gradual progress—substantial, meaningful change.

Key Qualitative insights

We asked our participants: “What is your experience of being a woman in leadership?”



Through in-depth discussions on gender stereotypes and how they act as barriers to women's leadership, it was found that organisations often perceive women getting married/ maternity leaves as a liability, leading to biases that deter many from hiring or promoting women within the impact sector. Such stereotypes can significantly limit women's opportunities, contributing to a systemic barrier that prevents talented individuals from joining the workforce or advancing in their careers.

In the impact sector, there is a perception that it is a field primarily "suitable" for women, marginalising men who work in it as they become a minority. This stereotype not only overlooks the contributions of male professionals but also reinforces the idea that women's roles are secondary or less important, despite their being in the majority. Consequently, this narrative can create additional hurdles for aspiring women leaders, as the perception that their work is less serious undermines their ambitions and may deter them from pursuing leadership positions.

Furthermore, women's involvement in the social sector is often regarded as supplementary work or a means of generating additional income, which diminishes the perceived significance of their roles. This perspective can lead to a lack of investment in women's professional development, as their work is seen as an extension of domestic responsibilities rather than a legitimate career path. Consequently, the intersection of these stereotypes creates a challenging environment for women, impeding their potential to lead and innovate within the impact sector. Addressing these biases is crucial for cultivating an equitable workplace that recognizes and values women's leadership contribution.

“Men who work for you have a very difficult time in accepting female leadership. Women have to constantly strive to be heard and for their voice to reach out to others.”

– Female founder of an organisation

Acceptability and Space for different styles of Leadership:

Women in leadership roles frequently feel compelled to adopt a predominantly masculine persona, which limits their expression of femininity. This pressure to conform to traditional leadership norms can lead to increased stress and rapid burnout. Different leadership styles—transformational, authentic, and serve-first leadership—highlight the value of emotional intelligence and collaboration, yet women often feel that embracing these attributes may undermine their authority. As a result, the tension between authentic self-expression and organisational expectations can contribute to a cycle of exhaustion and diminished well-being among women leaders.



“We need to believe in empathetic leadership. Expecting a leader to be a power figure is a masculine concept of leadership. To cultivate women’s leadership is about consciously building a space where there is acceptability and accountability”

**– Senior Woman
Leader at an INGO**

Mentorship is vital for advancing women in leadership, as it provides the guidance and support needed to navigate systemic challenges and gender biases. Mentors help women build confidence, expand their professional networks, and develop essential leadership skills such as negotiation and strategic decision-making. Studies show that women with mentors are more likely to aim for and attain leadership positions, as mentors not only serve as role models but also offer practical advice on work-life balance, which is particularly important for women balancing personal and professional responsibilities (Kram, 1985; Sandberg, 2013). Moreover, mentorship can break the isolation women leaders often face in male-dominated fields, fostering an environment of inclusion and ambition. Through these relationships, mentees gain critical resources and insights that prepare them for long-term success in leadership roles.

“Constant mentoring and guidance from senior leadership is something that can really make a female employee feel that the organisation is interested in their growth and development”

– Aspiring woman leader from a NGO



How Mentorship Positively Impacts Women's Leadership Journey

Infographic Source: Author's Construction based on participant responses from KII's

Breaking Down Networking

What goes into creating a conducive environment for women to thrive on their leadership journey and become empowered leaders?

Creating a conducive environment for women to thrive as leaders requires a blend of individual-focused interventions, such as mentorship and leadership training, and organisational-focused efforts like comprehensive gender-sensitive promotion practices, and flexible work arrangements. Together, these factors create an inclusive culture that supports women's growth and leadership success.



Lack of networking opportunities is a common issue faced by all archetypes, when it comes to leadership strengthening.

Research shows how women are more likely to form high-status connections through third-party endorsements than direct interactions with leaders. Therefore, introductions from trusted colleagues enhance credibility.

Women face a double bind in networking: Being seen as too assertive can harm their reputation, while being too passive

can limit their visibility. Emphasizing collaborative strengths can help women showcase their capabilities authentically.

Research shows that women often struggle with initiating conversations, however they are great at nurturing genuine relationships. Additionally, women are one-third more likely than men to establish high-status connections through third-party endorsements.

Informal settings can reduce pressure and foster genuine connections among women leaders.

Networking should focus on cultivating genuine, trust-based relationships rather than transactional interactions. Personal Advisory Boards can provide support, perspective, and mentorship.

Sponsorship: A new Approach - Research shows that well-structured "Network Sponsor Program" initiatives can significantly benefit women in the workplace. These programs are designed to cultivate meaningful, trust-based relationships between women and individuals who already possess the confidence of influential leaders within the organisation. Unlike mentorship,

which focuses more on guidance, sponsorship involves actively promoting women's careers by leveraging the sponsor's connections and influence to create opportunities for advancement.

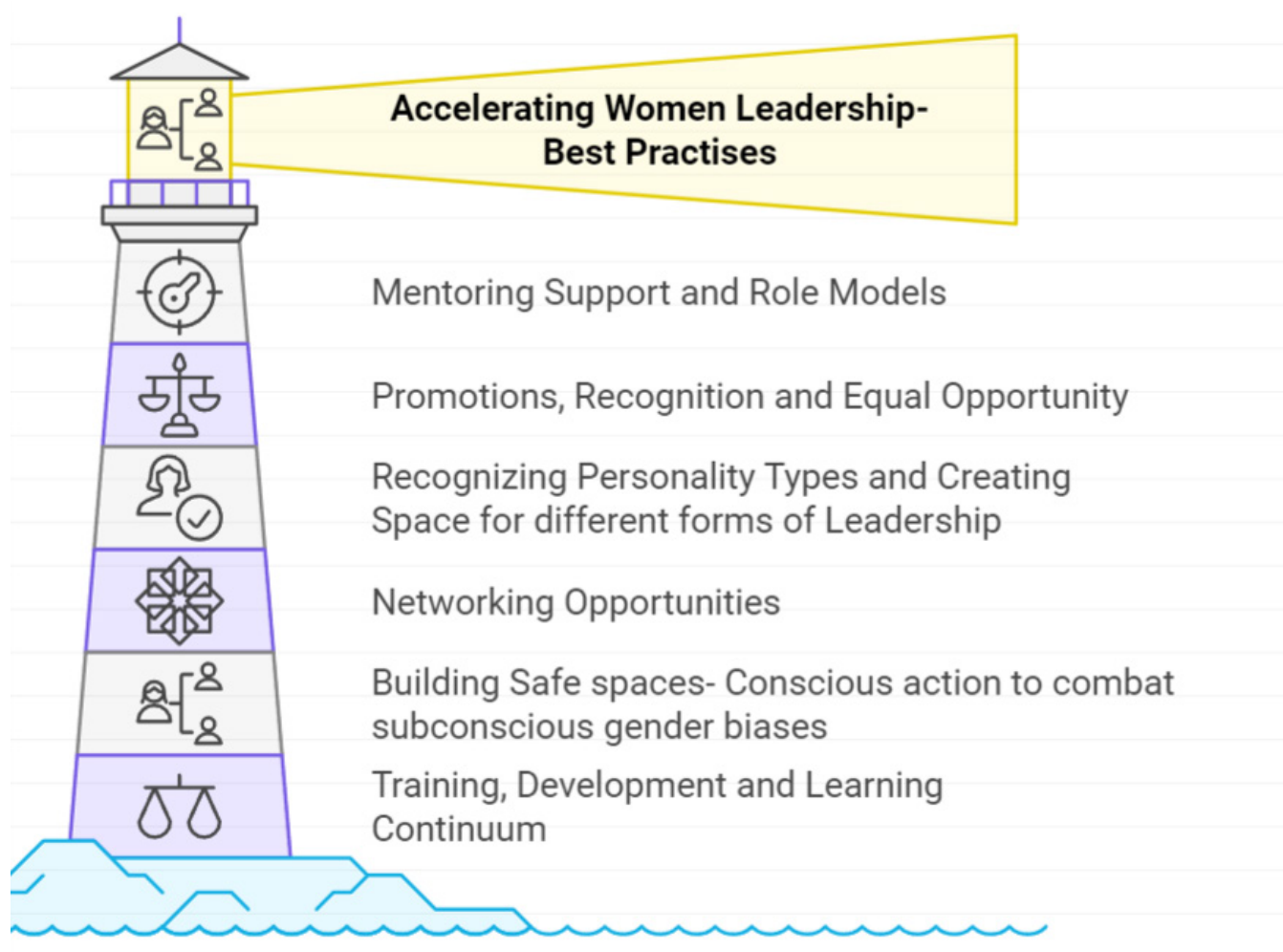
Female Triplet Effect: Organisations should consider pairing entry-level women with mid-senior level women employee and senior women in the organisation who are well recognised within and outside the organisation. This tripartite relationship can be particularly effective in creating intergenerational linking and learning with a 'mentor the mentor' approach.



By investing in women's leadership through training, networking, supportive policies, and equitable task distribution, organisations can harness diverse perspectives, drive innovation, and promote sustainable growth. These interventions help break down gender biases, ensuring that women are not only represented but can effectively lead and make impactful decisions at all levels.

Accelerating Women's Leadership in Organisations: Best Practices

Fostering women's leadership in organisations is essential for building diverse, inclusive, and high-performing workplaces. To identify the most effective strategies for supporting women's leadership, a study was conducted using Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and in-depth discussions. The insights gathered highlight key best practices that can drive meaningful change and create environments where women can thrive in leadership roles.



The infographic illustrates these best practices in the form of a lighthouse, symbolizing guidance and progress. Below are the key strategies identified:

- 1 Mentoring Support and Role Models**

Providing access to mentorship and visible role models helps women develop leadership skills, gain confidence, and navigate career challenges. Successful female leaders serve as inspirations and offer guidance to the next generation.
- 2 Promotions, Recognition, and Equal Opportunity**

Organisations must ensure that promotion and recognition processes are fair and transparent, giving women equal opportunities to advance in leadership roles based on merit.
- 3 Recognising Personality Types and Creating Space for Different Leadership Styles**

Leadership is not one-size-fits-all. Recognising diverse leadership styles allows women to lead authentically, leveraging their strengths rather than conforming to traditional leadership norms.
- 4 Networking Opportunities**

Facilitating networking through leadership forums, conferences, and associations enables women to build relationships, access career opportunities, and gain industry insights, fostering leadership development.
- 5 Building Safe Spaces – Conscious Action to Combat Subconscious Gender Biases**

Organisations must actively challenge gender biases by creating safe, inclusive environments where women feel empowered to speak up, take risks, and lead confidently. This includes avoiding the "gendering of tasks" and ensuring equitable distribution of responsibilities.
- 6 Training, Development, and Learning Continuum**

Investing in continuous leadership development programs ensures that women have access to the training and skills needed to succeed in leadership roles. This includes:

 - Training and recruiting women for leadership roles, nurturing their skills in project management and decision-making.
 - Creating safe spaces for independent and collaborative learning to elevate women's leadership impact.
 - Restoring confidence for women re-entering the workforce after breaks or maternity leave.
- 7 Supportive Policies for Work-Life Balance**

Policy amendments such as affordable childcare, extended parental leave, and flexible work arrangements play a crucial role in enabling women to balance professional growth with personal responsibilities, ultimately promoting leadership opportunities.

By investing in women's leadership through training, networking, supportive policies, and equitable task distribution, organisations can harness diverse perspectives, drive innovation, and promote sustainable growth. These interventions help break down gender biases, ensuring that women are not only represented but can effectively lead and make impactful decisions at all levels.



“We have to be mindful that women have been accustomed to not saying “No”. Assumed responsibility leads to quicker burn outs. Organisations must focus on creating an atmosphere where women feel comfortable in setting boundaries, saying no, without fearing a loss in opportunity”

– Woman leader of a Global Development Organisation

GENDER INTEGRATION AT WORKPLACE



Gender integration in the workplace is the process of fostering an environment where individuals of all genders have equal opportunities to participate, contribute, and thrive. It requires dismantling systemic barriers, challenging biases, and implementing inclusive policies that promote fair treatment and equitable access to resources, opportunities, and leadership roles.



While these factors are fundamental to gender integration, they are not the sole indicators. In our study, we engaged participant organisations through a series of questions to assess the current state of gender-inclusive practices in workplaces. Additionally, we consulted experts to gain deeper insights into what truly defines a gender-integrative organisation and identify best practices in this area.



81%

ORGANISATIONS
CONDUCT POSH
TRAININGS FOR
THEIR EMPLOYEES

94%

ORGANISATIONS
PROVIDE MATERNITY
LEAVES ACCORDING
TO THE MATERNITY
BENEFITS
(AMENDMENT) ACT,
2017

PoSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) and Maternity Care policies are mandatory workplace regulations in India, designed to ensure employee safety, well-being, and gender inclusivity. Our findings indicate that the vast majority of organisations have implemented these policies, with 81% conducting PoSH training for their employees and 94% providing maternity leave as per the Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Act, 2017.

While these numbers suggest significant progress, it was surprising to find that some organisations, albeit a small fraction, have yet to fully adopt these essential policies. This raises concerns about compliance and awareness, as well as the potential gaps in workplace protections for employees.

Beyond mandatory policies, organisations are also taking additional steps to foster gender integration, such as introducing flexible work arrangements, gender-neutral hiring practices, pay parity initiatives, and equal opportunity frameworks. These measures contribute to a more inclusive and supportive work environment, ensuring that gender integration is not just about compliance but also about fostering equity and empowerment in the workplace.

A study by ICRW suggests that implementing gender-inclusive opportunities leads to greater gender equality and women's empowerment, driving positive change for employees, communities, and the broader economy. Organisations that prioritize these efforts not only comply with legal mandates but also cultivate a more diverse, engaged, and productive workforce.

34%

ORGANISATIONS DO NOT PROVIDE TRAVEL FOR WOMEN AFTER WORKING HOURS.

Travelling for work, especially in community and grassroots organisations that work in remote locations is a two-pronged challenge. While organisational budgetary constraints are one, safety concerns on the field are also of key importance. Organisations working with the community often implement strategies such as not sending women alone on field and having men accompany them for safety. By prioritising budgeting and ensuring safe means of travel, organisations can facilitate women on field.

40%

ORGANISATIONS DO NOT OFFER FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS.

It can be particularly challenging for community-based organisations to offer flexible working arrangements, especially due to the nature of their work, which often involves on-the-ground efforts, in-person engagement, and direct service delivery to the communities they serve due to following reasons:

- **Dependency on External Stakeholders:** In community organisations, activities may depend on external factors, such as the availability of local stakeholders, community leaders, or service users.
- **Emergency Response Needs:** Many community organisations work in fields like healthcare where they need to be agile and respond quickly to emergent situations. Flexible working hours can hinder their ability to address urgent community needs.
- **Limited Staff and Resources:** Community organisations, especially smaller ones, may not have enough staff to cover various shifts or flexible working hours. A small team means that the presence of each staff member is crucial for the organisation to function effectively.

Only

40%

organisations offer training on gender sensitivity and unconscious bias, which are crucial for fostering an inclusive environment.

Only

45%

organisations track gender equity metrics regularly, highlighting a gap in accountability and data-driven decision-making regarding women's leadership.

85%

Organisations do not monitor/publish (internally) gender-segregated pay information or an overall gender pay gap

Small and medium organisations rely on informal check-ins and team meetings to strengthen culture whereas large organisations rely on more structured approaches, especially when it comes to cross teams/vertical communication.

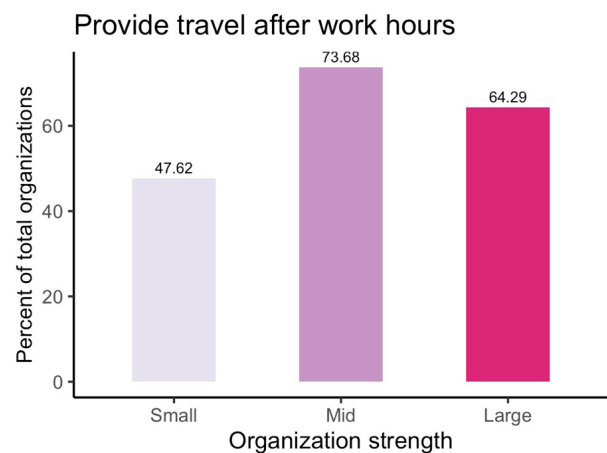
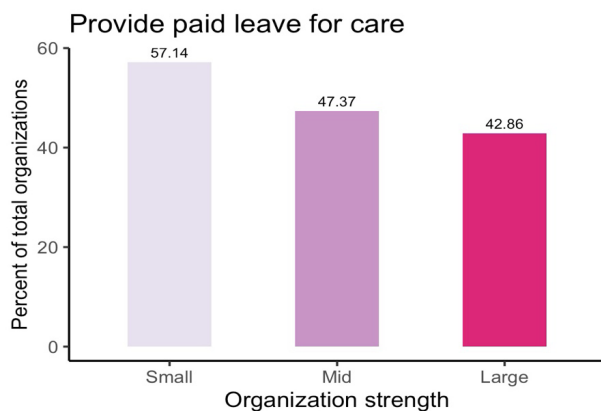
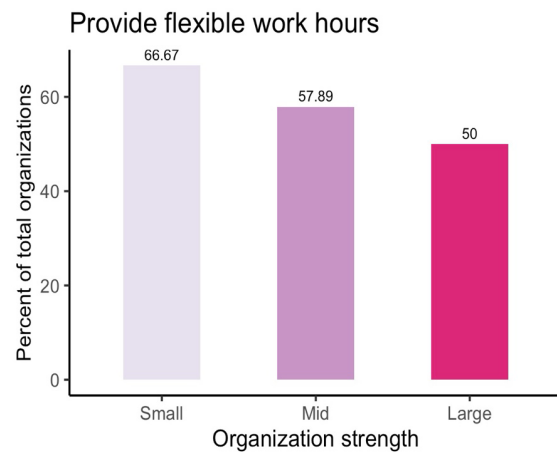
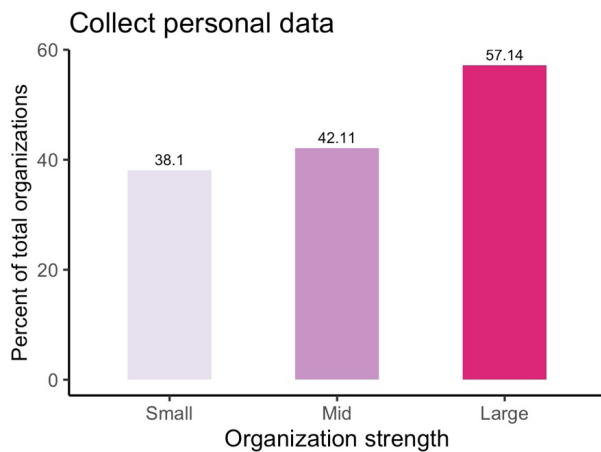
In policy advocacy organisations, where women work with governance and external stakeholders, it is important to address confidence gap and build capacities in communication and negotiation skills.

When it comes to financial decisions, there are often preconceived notions questioning women's competence. By amplifying the role of women in these roles within philanthropic organisations, it helps dismantle these biases, demonstrating their effectiveness in managing funds and strategic allocations. This visibility can also inspire confidence among donors, showcasing a commitment to diverse, capable leadership in driving financial stewardship.

i

There is a need to recognise mental health at the policy level, ensuring that mental health support is integrated into organisational frameworks and practices. Our research found that organisations addressing sensitive issues, such as gender-based violence and sexual health, experience unique stressors that can impact employee well-being. Acknowledging mental health as a critical component of overall organisational health can lead to better outcomes for staff and the communities they serve.

The Big Picture - Gender-Intentional Work



Curious to know patterns in gender integration? We were too!

These graphs presents key indicators that reflect the extent to which organisations of varying sizes are engaging in gender-intentional practices. The data highlights significant disparities in efforts such as collecting personal data, providing flexible work hours, offering travel assistance after work hours, and enabling paid leave for caregiving responsibilities.

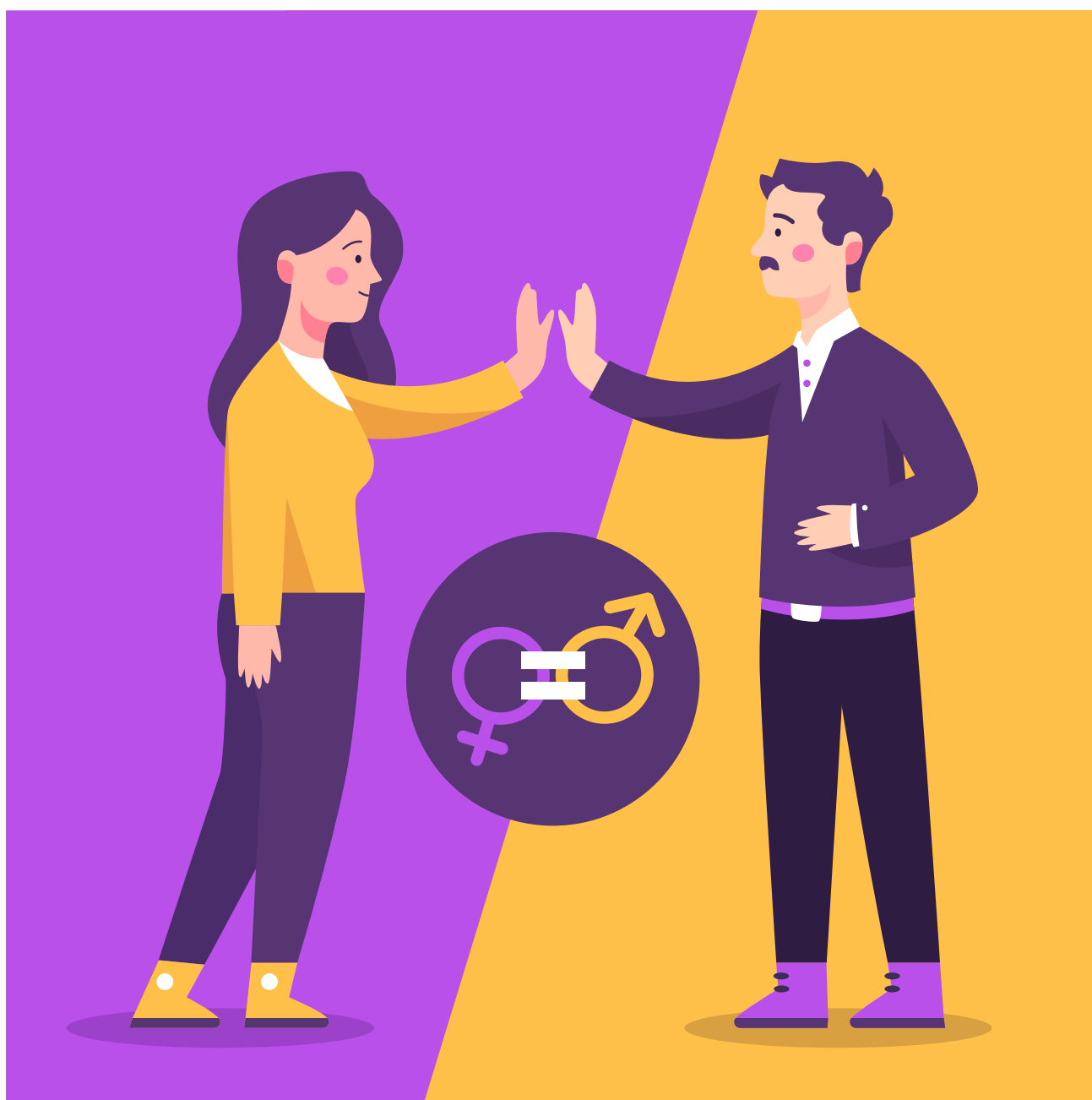
The data reveals key trends in gender integration policies. Larger organisations prioritize data collection (57.14%) but lag in caregiving leave (42.66%) and flexible work (50%). Small firms lead in flexibility (66.67%) and caregiving leave (57.14%), leveraging adaptability but lacking resources. Mid-sized organisations excel in travel support (73.68%), highlighting mixed engagement across areas.

As organisations grow in size, their approach to gender integration becomes more structured but also more complex. Larger organisations tend to formalize policies such as data collection and flexible work arrangements, yet they also face challenges in maintaining inclusivity at all levels. While large organisations demonstrate strong commitments to structured policies, they sometimes fall short in areas like caregiving leave and travel support, potentially due to bureaucratic constraints and standardized

processes that may not always prioritize gender-responsive policies.

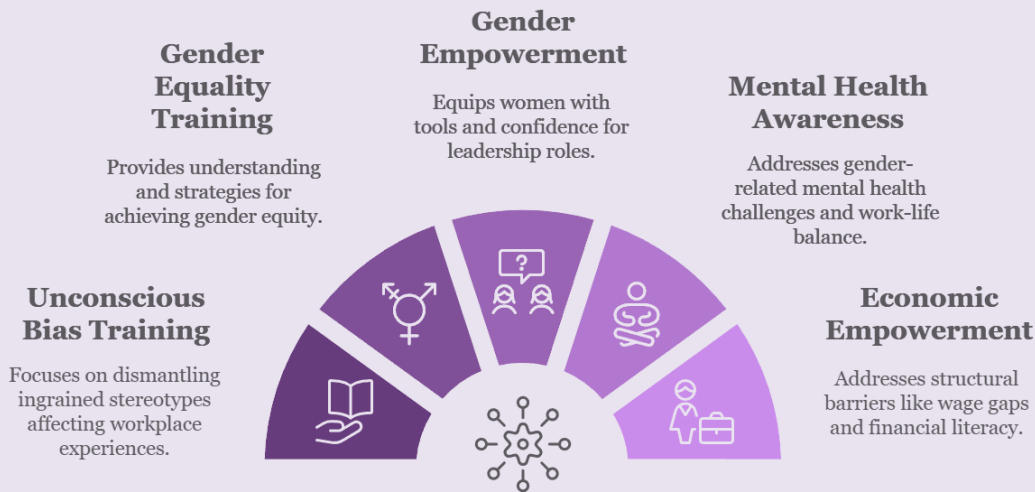
Conversely, smaller organisations often exhibit more flexibility and personalized approaches to gender integration due to their informal structures and smaller teams. However, their lack of institutional resources may limit their ability to implement large-scale diversity initiatives. Mid-sized and large organisations, which are in transitional phases of growth, display mixed levels of gender-intentional practices—often excelling in some areas while lagging in others.

The data suggests that as organisations scale, it is crucial to balance efficiency with inclusivity. Streamlined processes should not come at the expense of equitable policies that support a diverse workforce. By proactively addressing gaps—such as ensuring paid leave for caregiving and expanding flexible work options—organisations of all sizes can build workplaces that empower employees across genders while sustaining long-term growth and innovation.



Key Qualitative Insights

Employee Workshops



We asked our respondents what type of gender specific trainings and capacity development program do they have in their organisation:

Illustrated here are the types of gendered trainings conducted by organisations, highlighting where commitment, focus, and intentionality are directed. The frequency of training reflects the organisation's approach to fostering an inclusive and responsive work environment.

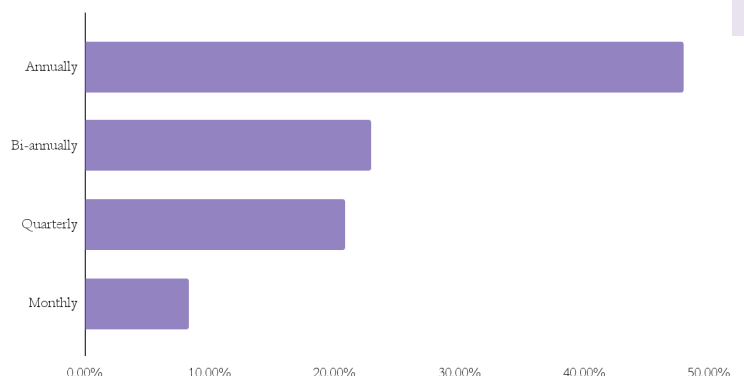
The graphic provides insights into gender integration in the workplace through various training programs designed to promote inclusivity and equity. It highlights five key types of gender-specific training: Gender Equality Training, which focuses on understanding and achieving equity; Gender Empowerment, which equips women with leadership skills; Mental Health Awareness, addressing gender-related challenges; Unconscious Bias Training, aimed at eliminating stereotypes; and Economic Empowerment, which helps break financial barriers. These training programs are essential in fostering a more inclusive work environment by addressing gender disparities and supporting employees in meaningful ways.

It also discusses the frequency of these training sessions, indicating how often organisations commit to gender capacity-building initiatives. Annual sessions provide a foundational approach but are not frequently updated, making them suitable for steady workplace cultures. Quarterly or bi-annual training sessions demonstrate a stronger commitment to inclusivity, ensuring workplaces remain responsive to gender issues. Monthly sessions, while less common, reflect a proactive and deeply integrated approach, reinforcing gender dynamics as a core aspect of organisational culture.

Focusing on creating a behavioural change through inclusivity trainings are crucial for fostering a long term sustainable solution for equitable workplaces that empower all employees to contribute meaningfully. The chart shows the frequency of organisations in conducting gender-focused training.

Annual sessions suggest that training is foundational but not frequently updated, suitable for steady cultures. Quarterly or bi-annual sessions indicate a stronger commitment to staying responsive to gender issues. Monthly training, while less common, highlights a highly proactive approach, keeping gender dynamics central to organisational culture.

Frequency of Gender Capacity Building Trainings



This bar chart further illustrates the prevalence of different training frequencies, showing that most organisations conduct gender training annually or bi-annually. The key takeaway is that regular and intentional gender training programs are crucial for creating an equitable workplace. Organisations that frequently engage in such initiatives show a higher commitment to fostering a diverse, inclusive, and supportive work environment.

“We are an all women’s organisation. Do we still need interventions to be gender inclusive?”

In the initial phases of the study, we had organisation representatives ask us this question. On probing further through KIIs with all women’s team here’s what we found:

Even an all-women organisation can benefit from gender sensitization interventions. Gender inclusivity goes beyond just male-female dynamics; it involves recognizing and addressing biases related to diverse gender identities, roles, and unconscious biases that may still exist among women themselves. The benefits of gender sensitization interventions in an all-women organisation include:

- ➔ **Promoting Inclusivity:** It helps create a more inclusive environment for diverse gender identities, including non-binary, transgender, or gender-nonconforming individuals.
- ➔ **Addressing Biases:** Unconscious biases related to roles, leadership, and expectations among women themselves can be addressed, fostering mutual respect and reducing internalized gender norms.
- ➔ **Encouraging Intersectionality:** It promotes awareness of how various aspects of identity (race, class, sexual orientation, etc.) intersect with gender, leading to more holistic inclusivity and fairness.
- ➔ **Enhancing Collaboration:** By raising awareness of different perspectives and experiences, it encourages better communication and teamwork among employees.
- ➔ **Empowering Leadership:** Sensitization can help women leaders break down stereotypes within the organisation, allowing for more diverse leadership styles and decision-making approaches.
- ➔ **Strengthening External Relationships:** Organisations that embrace inclusivity are more likely to attract diverse partners, clients, and stakeholders, enhancing reputation and impact.



While the communities we work with, have deep rooted societal patriarchal norms, we realised that it is extremely important to create a safe working space for women by negating those norms within the workspace. Curated training sessions that are designed to eliminate internalised, unconscious biases can be really impactful in doing so.

- Social Development Practitioner

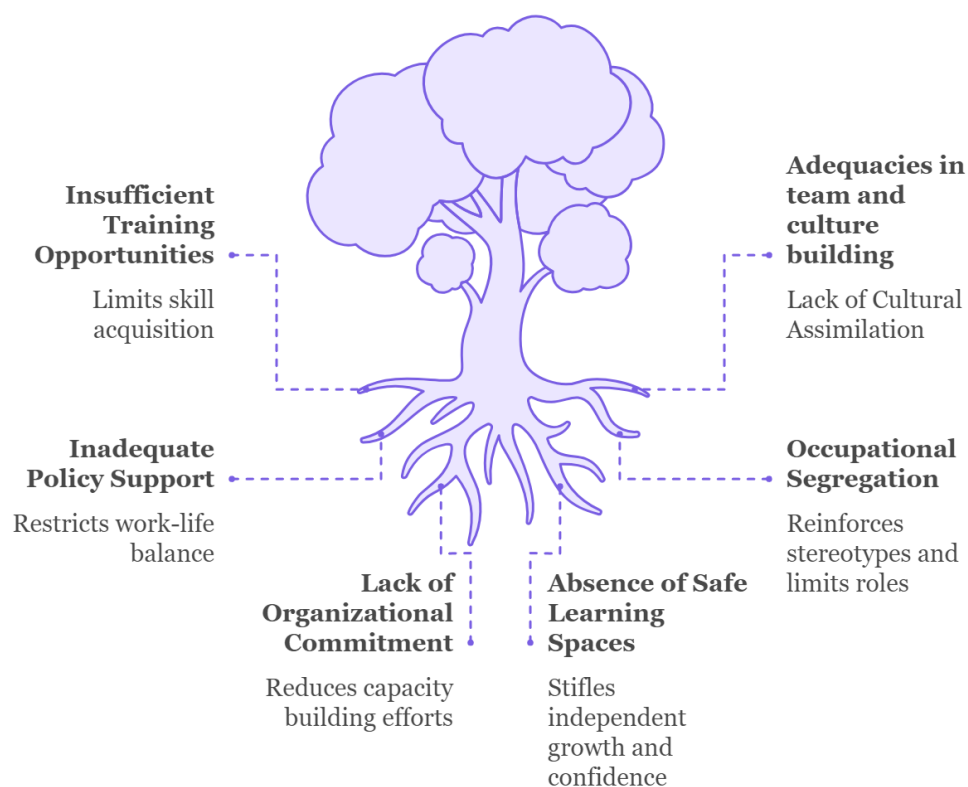
Intersectionality and acknowledgment of varied lived experiences of women is how organisations can create an atmosphere where gender identity does not hold someone back professionally.

- Senior Women Leader at Development Organisation

Policies can only be effective, when they are designed in a way that is iterative and open. There should be a constant scope for taking feedback and implementing it to improve the day-to-day lived experiences of women at workplace.

- Research Manager of an advocacy organisation

Why prioritise Gender Integration Workplace: Inadequacies and Implications



This tree diagram illustrates the foundational challenges that impact gender equity within organisations, represented by roots that hinder growth. Insufficient Training Opportunities limit employees' skill development, creating barriers to advancement and perpetuating inequities. Inadequate Policy Support restricts work-life balance, which often disproportionately affects women and those with caregiving responsibilities. The Lack of Organisational Commitment weakens sustained efforts in capacity building, undermining long-term inclusivity goals. Absence of Safe Learning Spaces creates an environment

where employees may fear judgment, which stifles self-expression, confidence, and personal growth.

Occupational Segregation reinforces gender stereotypes, confining individuals to traditional roles and limiting diversity in leadership pathways. Finally, Inadequacies in Team and Culture Building hinder cultural integration and respect, making it challenging to build genuinely inclusive and cohesive teams. Addressing these deep-rooted issues is essential to fostering a culture of equality, empowerment, and resilience within the organisation.



A group of people are gathered around a table in a meeting. A large, semi-transparent purple circle is overlaid on the image, containing the text. In the background, a woman with long blonde hair is looking down at a tablet. To her right, a man in a blue patterned shirt is holding a pen. In the foreground, a person with long dark hair is using a mouse. The table has several white coffee cups, a stack of yellow sticky notes, and a tablet with a grid pattern on its screen.

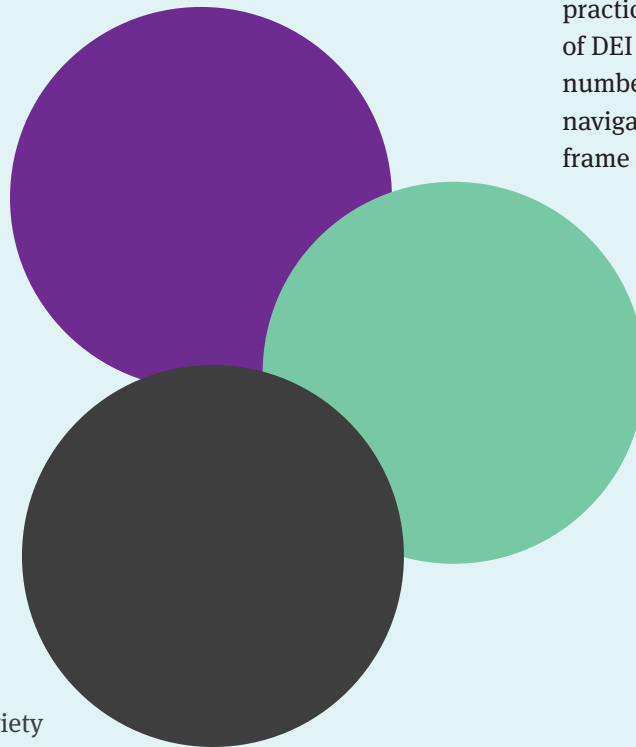
DEI

(DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION) AT WORKPLACE

What is Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in organisations?

DEI principles involve a set of organisational frameworks aiming to promote a socially sensitive and acceptable environment in the workplace. It fosters representation and participation from historically marginalised groups, including women, caste minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised communities. DEI initiatives focus on accommodating and creating spaces that uplift these disadvantaged groups, ensuring their voices are heard and valued.

Most organisations practice DEI through behavioural change and human cultural practices. While the concept of DEI is still novel, a massive number of organisations are navigating their way to adapt, frame and implement.



This study revealed a variety of DEI workplace practices, highlighting that while organisations demonstrate a genuine intention to foster a sensitive, accommodating and equitable environment, ongoing guidance and support are still needed to fully realize these goals.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Workplace: Key Indicators

95%

ORGANISATIONS POSSESS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY POLICY OR EQUIVALENT POLICY

83%

ORGANISATIONS WERE INTENTIONAL ABOUT INTEGRATING DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN THEIR TRAINING.

80%

ORGANISATIONS DO NOT CONDUCT ADDITIONAL (APART FROM MANDATORY POSH TRAINING) GENDER AWARENESS TRAININGS



In a McKinsey report, it was found that a higher number of gender and cultural representation in teams result in better organisational performance. Emerging and low gender-parity economies can replicate what works and what does not, further creating the possibility that they can leapfrog to a position of greater competitive advantage.



43%

ORGANISATIONS
DO NOT HAVE ANY
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION
POLICY FOR WOMEN OR
GENDER MINORITIES

50%

ORGANISATIONS DO
NOT CONDUCT ANY
DEI FOCUSED CAPACITY
BUILDING/TRAINING
SESSIONS.

63%

ORGANISATIONS HAS
NEVER RECEIVED ANY
SUPPORT (FUNDING
OR TECHNICAL)
TO UNDERTAKE DEI
FOCUSED TRAININGS.

Grassroots organisations are DEI focussed but face challenges in implementing formal DEI policies due to resource constraints. DEI efforts are often informal and limited to PoSH policies, making it difficult for women to advance.

Policy advocacy organisations generally were found to have structured DEI strategies, including councils to drive gender equity, but male-dominated environments and funding limitations create barriers to full implementation.

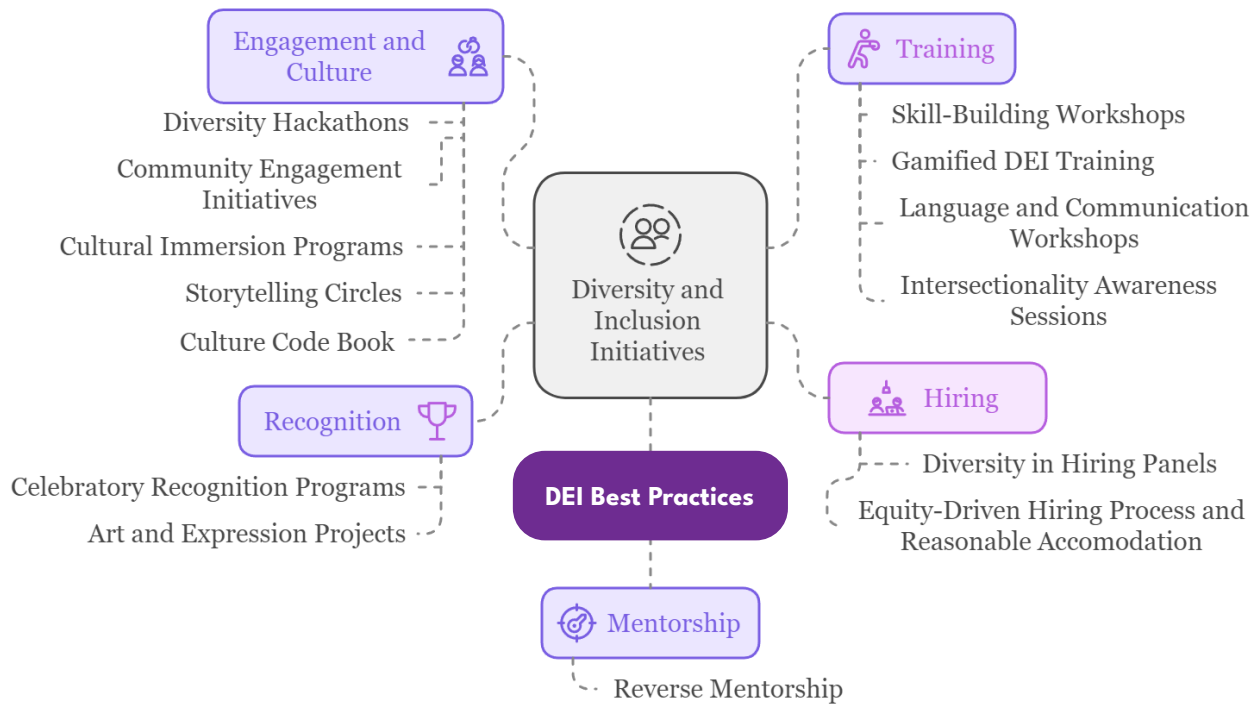
With stronger financial resources, philanthropic organisations can advance DEI through diverse hiring, leadership programs, and capacity-building. However, traditional leadership, hiring structures may still hinder the progressions.

While DEI policies were found to be in place for research organisations, gender imbalances persist, making it challenging for women to access leadership roles. There is often a disconnect between policy and practice in fostering inclusive cultures.

Community development organisations were found to be highly committed to inclusion, actively working to create safe spaces and engage structurally excluded groups. Resource limitations impact the depth of DEI initiatives, despite a strong focus on equity.

While limited by financial and structural capacity, small and medium organisations were found to prioritise informal DEI efforts. Large organisations are more likely to have structured DEI policies, including councils and initiatives for workplace accommodations. Despite this, they still face challenges in challenging traditional hiring practices and modalities of organisational governance.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Workplace: Best Practices



Although DEI consciousness is still in its growth stage, organisations have been adopting innovative methods to incorporate DEI principles in their organisational ethos:

- ➔ **Unconscious Bias Simulation Experiences:** Immersive online quizzes, and activities that allow participants to experience scenarios highlighting unconscious biases in real-time.
- ➔ **Wellness Programs for Diverse Needs:** Tailored wellness initiatives that address the unique physical and mental health needs of different employee demographics.
- ➔ **Employee-led Podcast Series on DEI Topics:** An internal office podcast where employees discuss DEI issues, share experiences, and amplify diverse voices.
- ➔ **Art for DEI:** Curated art sessions where employee draw, share works from underrepresented artists from their community/network, promoting cultural appreciation and dialogue.
- ➔ **Diversity Storytelling Festival:** An event where employees share personal narratives that highlight diverse experiences, fostering empathy and connection.

“Individuals with lived experiences bring more sensitivity to the table. Their experiences make them better equipped to handle, facilitate and educate. So, people with lived experiences of a certain type, should be encouragingly inducted in roles that lie in that spectrum”

– Senior Leader of Philanthropic Institution

- Promoting diversity in hiring and embracing non-linear hiring practices are crucial for advancing DEI. This involves crafting inclusive job descriptions, utilising diverse talent sources, and implementing skills-based assessments that recognize unconventional career paths. By broadening hiring criteria and prioritising diverse perspectives, organisations can enhance innovation, reduce bias, and better reflect the communities they serve, ultimately fostering a more inclusive workplace.
- Having “Happy Engage Goal” is an organisational goal that falls under the responsibilities of

the senior leadership where the employees’ satisfaction at workplace, and their happiness index are monitored and discussed, weekly.

- Culture Code Book serves as a medium of education and knowledge for all the employees and is subjected to periodic revisions to keep with the changing diversity of the workplace.
- Implementing cross-functional teams with people from diverse skill set/departments such as research, web development, tech etc, work on a project, elevating practice of accepting functional differences.



“Changes to outdated hiring, training, performance review, promotion, pay, and other systems that are pro-women are required for an inclusive and collaborative culture”

– HR of a Social Impact organisation



We asked our participants,

“How do you navigate the combination of policy and practice when it comes to DEI and how is policy change important?”

Policy

A principle or action that has been formalised and adopted by an organisation for a specific motive. It helps in driving and building a certain ecosystem. E.g: An equal opportunity policy is a company's formal document that outlines their commitment to fair treatment of all employees.

Practice

A best practice is a tangible step taken towards fulfilling a vision, and is suitable for all team members in terms of practicing it regularly. For example: Usage of pronouns in the workplace.

One of our participating organisations, had an informal Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) where employees from underrepresented backgrounds gathered to support each other, share experiences, and discuss workplace challenges. These groups operated independently, focusing on community building and networking.

Transition to Policy: Recognising the positive impact of ERGs on employee engagement and inclusion, the organisation decided to formalise these groups into a structured policy. The leadership developed a DEI policy that included:

- **Recognition of ERGs:** Officially acknowledging ERGs as integral to the organisation's culture.
- **Resources and Support:** Providing dedicated resources, funding, and time for ERG activities.
- **Accountability:** Establishing guidelines for ERG leadership, including metrics for success and regular reporting to senior management.

Outcome: The formalisation of ERGs into policy not only strengthened the organisation's commitment to diversity and inclusion but also created a more supportive environment for all employees. It led to enhanced participation, clearer objectives, and measurable outcomes, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive workplace culture.

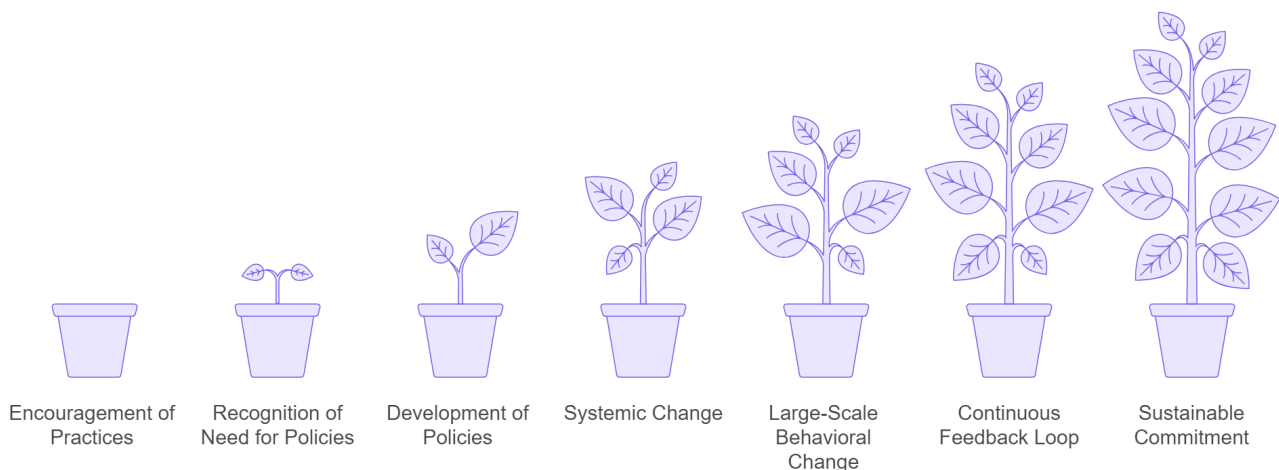


Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Workplace: Key Insights

“Having Inclusive Practices is important, but cultures are not just build on practices. The moment attention is lost, practices may see a slump. It is important to build policies and put them in black and white. This solidifies leadership commitment, keeps accountability in check.

- Director of an NGO

Achieving Sustainable Commitment



Based on our qualitative insights with DEI experts, we were able to create the above image illustrating the process of fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace, emphasising the need for structured policies and continuous commitment. A quote from an NGO director highlights the importance of not just encouraging inclusive practices but also institutionalizing them through formal policies to ensure accountability and leadership commitment. The visual representation uses a growing plant analogy to depict the gradual development of DEI efforts, starting from basic encouragement to a deeply embedded, sustainable culture.

The stages of DEI implementation include:

1. Encouragement of Practices – Initial efforts to promote inclusivity and fair workplace behaviors.
2. Recognition of Need for Policies – Identifying gaps and the necessity of formal policies.
3. Development of Policies – Establishing clear DEI guidelines and procedures.
4. Systemic Change – Integrating policies into workplace structures and daily operations.
5. Large-Scale Behavioral Change – Shifting mindsets and behaviors across the organisation.
6. Continuous Feedback Loop – Ensuring ongoing assessment and improvement of DEI practices.
7. Sustainable Commitment – Embedding DEI into the organisation's core values and long-term strategy.

The overall message conveys that fostering an inclusive workplace requires more than one-time efforts or informal practices. It demands continuous reinforcement, systemic policy changes, and a long-term commitment to ensure meaningful and lasting progress in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

A special shoutout to organisations that are leading the way by incorporating fresh policies and practices that are gender intentional.



Gender Neutral Policy
for Care Leaves



Formulation of Gender
Pay Parity Policy to bring
inclusivity and equity at
workspace



Formulation of Gender
Pay Parity Policy to bring
inclusivity and equity at
workspace



Promotion and
inclusion of women in
leadership roles



Curating team building
exercise exposing people
to themes of gender
inclusion and sensitivity



Creating a free
work ecosystem for
conversations around
lived experience



“Power of Conversations”
- Informal team discussion
around Gender sensitivity
within the organisation



DEI framework focuses
on respecting individual
political preferences, food
choices and personality/
social behaviour



Mental Health Allowance,
Diverse PoSH Committee
and Grievance Committee



DEI framework focuses on
respecting individual political
preferences, food choices and
personality/social behaviour



Educational curriculum and
readings around Gender
concepts for organisational
sensitisation



Implementing cross-functional
teams from diverse skill set/
departments for one project,
elevating practice of accepting
functional differences

RECOMMENDATIONS

These are recommendations to organisations that focus on the integration of gender-intentional strategies and processes into their culture and processes, prioritise the nature of their policies and practices as well as highlight their need of building capacities.

Throughout this study, we have gathered several recommendations for individuals, organisations, leaders, and policymakers to create more gender-intentional workplaces. While some of these recommendations are already in practice, others serve as guiding principles for reflection and improvement. We leave our readers with these final insights to inspire meaningful action.



Actions for Inclusivity

- ➔ **Participatory Approach to Well-being (PAW):** Implementing PAW initiatives that offer employees autonomy in defining and utilising provisions for self-care, child care, and mental health, empowering them to shape their own well-being practices.
- ➔ **Expanding Diversity Hirings:** Building diverse talent pipelines by connecting with diversity-oriented job groups, partnering with diversity organisations, and developing outreach programs with educational institutions to focus equitably on underrepresented groups.
- ➔ **Creating Community Spaces for Women Leaders:** Organisations can collaborate to create avenues for women leaders to meet their peers and exchange knowledge. Additionally, organisations can motivate and encourage participation in leadership forums, conferences, and professional associations to promote collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- ➔ **Formal Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs:** Establishing structured mentorship and sponsorship initiatives, pairing women leaders with experienced mentors who can provide guidance, advocacy, and support for their advancement within the organisation.
- ➔ **Gender appropriate language in Job Descriptions:** Reviewing and revising job descriptions to eliminate gendered language that may deter applicants. Using inclusive, role-specific qualifications to attract diverse talent.
- ➔ **Cross-Functional Teams and Role Rotation:** Encouraging cross-functional teams and rotating roles regularly to avoid gendered role confinement, fostering a DEI-friendly environment that considers safe spaces, supportive infrastructure, and inclusive behavioural practices.

- ➔ **Sponsorship:** Besides mentorship, networking opportunities and relationship building can be encouraged by having sponsorship programme within the organisation.
- ➔ **Training, development and learning continuum:** Nurturing their skills in project management and decision making. This also includes capacity building for women at leadership roles.
- ➔ **Promotions, recognition and equal opportunity:** When organisations actively recognize and reward achievements, it not only boosts morale but also enhances overall productivity. Equal opportunity in promotions helps to break down systemic barriers, promoting diversity and inclusion at all levels.
- ➔ **Recognizing personality types and creating space for different forms of leadership:**
By understanding that individuals possess varying traits—ranging from introversion and extroversion to analytical thinking and creative problem-solving—leaders can tailor their approaches to suit different team members.

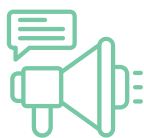
- ➔ **Encouraging and supporting the creation** of formal and informal safe spaces and ‘candid communication channels.’
- ➔ **Confidential feedback channels:** This method acts as an inclusive measure by creating a safe space for constructive criticism and feedback without compromising the privacy and confidentiality of the employee.
- ➔ **Addressing wage gaps and financial literacy:** Organisations can conduct sufficient workshops and specialised training for women leaders to address any knowledge gaps in financial literacy such as taxation, TDS, etc.



Addressing the Menstruation Leave Conundrum: A Self-Care Management Policy



Self-Care Management Policy with the provision for 12 extra care leaves per year - for all employees (menstruators could use it as menstrual leaves, non-menstruators could use them as self care leaves, etc)



Our study found that a lot of organisations are willing to give menstrual leave but the idea faced discord by non-menstruators in different aspects. A possible solution is changing the way people perceive menstrual leaves and adopting a self-care approach. If 12 extra leaves per year can be given to all genders it will allow menstruators to have the flexibility of using them as per their convenience. This would further prevent situations where individuals are not hired due to a perceived impression of a liability.



The implementation of period leave in the workplace not only addresses the issue of pain and discomfort for menstruators but also enables to break the taboo around periods. A direct need for policies around menstrual health should become a priority and implement menstruation policies. The purpose of menstrual leave is to acknowledge and accommodate the unique needs of individuals who menstruate and support those who face various issues such as severe pain, excessive bleeding or phenomenon like endometriosis and PCOS.

Reasonable Accommodations: Let Your Needs Be Known



In India, the Rights of People with Disabilities Act, 2016, provides a definition of 'reasonable accommodation' as the essential and suitable changes or adjustments that do not unfairly or excessively burden a specific case. Its purpose is to ensure that individuals with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities to enjoy and exercise their rights as others

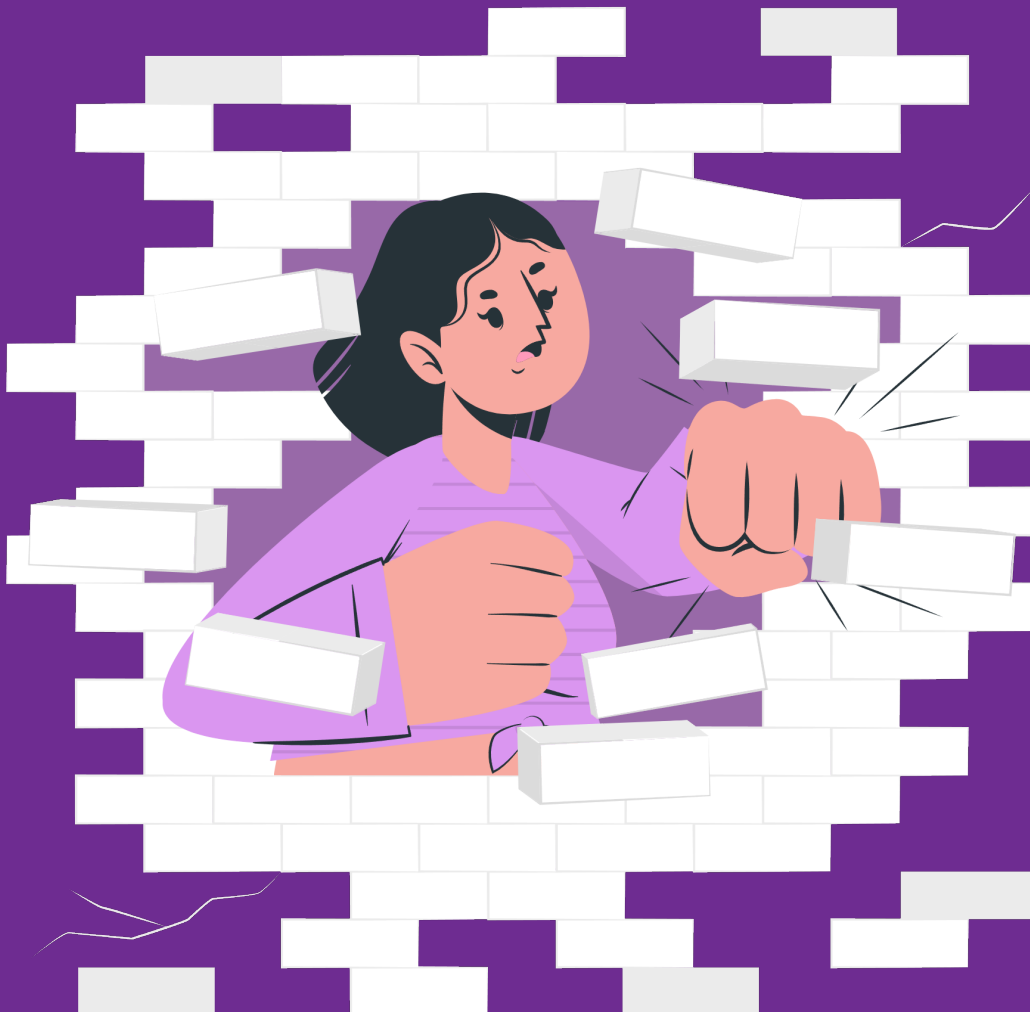
Reasonable accommodations are essentially procedures and processes implemented by organisations to facilitate employees in completing their work. For instance, if an individual experiences anxiety while public speaking, they may request to be exempted from such tasks in their role. This serves as one example of reasonable accommodation. Another example could involve an individual with ADHD finding it challenging to work for a full eight-hour shift. In this case, they might propose taking a three-hour break and then completing the remaining hours. These examples illustrate different types of reasonable accommodations that should be considered during the interview process.

While flexibility can encompass a wide range of adjustments for all employees, reasonable accommodation specifically focuses on addressing barriers faced by individuals with disabilities. Effective accommodation practices can include organisation's incorporation of systematic and synced calendars for time management, fidget toys and white noise systems for focus-building, and attempts to switch to digital work systems for easier workflow tracking by employees, etc.

Grievance Committee: Hearing the silences

A Grievance Committee should constitute of people from diverse sexualities, genders, castes and be reflective. Having people from diverse backgrounds helps people to talk/share their grievances easily, opposed to having a committee with similar backgrounds because it makes difficult for a member of the marginalised community to address issues further. The aim of the committee is to hear the unheard/silences of the people in an organisation where it is truly safe for employees to vocalise their issues without fearing any judgement.

At the same time it is essential for the organisation and the team to self-review if the employees are not having any complaints or grievances, as this suggests that individuals feel apprehensive about expressing themselves and sharing openly. The mandate of the grievance committee includes creating a safe space and hearing people out. It is important for organisations to have a clear and transparent grievance procedure in place, ensuring confidentiality, impartiality, and prompt resolution of employee grievances. This helps maintain a healthy work environment, promotes trust and fairness, and allows employees to raise concerns without fear of retaliation.





Recommendations

- ➡ **Ensuring Gender Representation Across Departments:** Mandating a minimum percentage of women across various departments to promote equitable roles and avoid gender-based task segregation.
- ➡ **Advancing Women's Leadership and Skill-Building:** Supporting skill development, promotion pathways, and networking opportunities for women to facilitate their advancement into leadership roles.
- ➡ **Creating Equal Pay and Opportunity Framework:** Conducting regular pay parity assessments, tracking gender diversity data, and establishing an annual index to ensure equal opportunity.
- ➡ **Introducing Parental/Elder Care Leave Options:** Implementing paid leave provisions for employees to care for elderly or dependent family members, extending benefits beyond childbearing contexts.

WAY FORWARD

EquiLead

EquiLead has embarked further upon this journey with our “Gender Accelerator Program” to enable organisations integrate gender perspectives in their culture and operations, thereby creating a sustainable impact on gender equity. Its objective is to train and capacitate 50 NGOs by the end of 2026 by:

1. Increasing institutional capacity for gender sensitization and improving women’s leadership at all levels of the organisation.
2. Cultivate gender-equitable workplace cultures (improvement in interpersonal & inter-group behaviour) and institutional frameworks to secure women’s participation and growth.
3. Evidence based interventions within organisations and through their programs for closing the existing gender gap.

Based on learnings from the study, EquiLead is conducting a study on “Women’s Leadership in Climate Action” to understand the challenges faced by women’s leadership working in climate action and what best practices can be adopted to accelerate women’s representation and leadership in Climate Action.

ANNEXURE

01

Gender Integration

Process of assessing the implications for women, men and people with diverse gender identities of any planned action—including legislation, policies or programmes—in all areas and at all levels.

02

Women's Leadership

When women are meaningfully represented and engaged in leadership roles with the virtue to handling responsibilities, a team and organisation growth.

03

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Closely linked values held by organisations practising to support different groups of individuals, including people of different races, ethnicities, religions, caste, abilities, genders, and sexual orientations.

04

Capacity Building

Improvement in an individual's or organisation's facility to produce, perform or groom the skillset and human behaviour.

05

Best Practice

A standard or set of guidelines that is known to produce good outcomes if followed.

06

Organisational Archetype

Type of approach used by organisations to carry out certain set of work with a thematic lens.

07

Community Engagement

In the context of social sector, community is defined by people coming with a set of issues or challenges that need to be addressed through a specific approach.

08

Affirmative Action

A set of policies/practices/actions that aim to create equal opportunity for people from diverse and vulnerable backgrounds, with an aim to remove inequities.

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