Beyond Representation: Turning Women's Potential into Leadership

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Women's representation in leadership has **improved**, **supported by better regulation**, **greater awareness and growing recognition of the value of diverse leadership**. Yet representation alone does not guarantee equal access to executive positions nor to the opportunities that prepare people for senior leadership.

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), in October 2025 women held 38.2% of non-executive director positions in the largest listed companies in the EU, compared with just 18.5% of executive director positions. This gap raises an important question: **How do we move from increasing women's representation to enabling more women to exercise leadership and influence strategic decisions?**

Progress requires three interconnected priorities: looking beyond board representation, recognising the distinct roles of mentoring and sponsorship, and holding organisations accountable for outcomes. Women themselves also have an important role in actively shaping their leadership journeys.

1. Representation Is Progress. But Is It Enough?

Board representation is an important step towards more balanced leadership. Regulation, including the EU Women on Boards Directive, has helped put the issue firmly on the corporate governance agenda.

However, board representation and executive leadership are not interchangeable. Increasing the number of women on boards does not automatically remove the barriers that may limit their progression into executive positions.

As Eduardo Schultz, a fellow VAB member, highlighted in a recent conversation, the challenge also lies in the career pipeline. Organisations may achieve relatively balanced gender distribution at entry level, yet they then see women's representation diminish as careers progress towards middle and senior management. The question is not only who enters an organisation, but who gets the opportunities to advance once inside.

The real test is whether organisations create pathways through which capable women can gain the experience, visibility and responsibility needed to lead. This means looking beyond board composition to examine who gets access to critical assignments, who is considered for promotions, and who is identified as a future executive leader.

2. Mentoring Develops Potential. Sponsorship Opens Doors.

Mentoring and sponsorship both matter, but they serve different purposes.

Mentors help individuals develop capabilities, navigate challenges and build confidence. Sponsors go further: they use their credibility, influence and access to decision-makers to advocate for someone when opportunities arise. They recommend people for important assignments, raise their names in succession discussions, and help ensure their capabilities are recognised.

A 2025 report by McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org found that 65% of employees with sponsors had received a promotion over the preceding two years, compared with 35% of those without sponsors. Although the research was conducted in the United States and does not establish that sponsorship alone leads to promotions, it highlights the importance of active advocacy in career progression.

Organisations should therefore think beyond mentoring programmes. They should also create opportunities for talented women to build relationships with senior decision-makers, gain exposure to strategic responsibilities and be considered for roles that broaden their capabilities.

3. Progress Requires Accountability

Leadership progression cannot depend solely on individual ambition or informal networks.

Organisations must ensure that talent is identified and developed fairly, and that capable women have equal opportunities to advance.

Boards, CEOs and nomination committees should ask practical questions: Are women represented in succession plans for key executive roles? Who receives high-visibility assignments? Are appointment criteria transparent and consistently applied? Are candidates assessed on their capabilities and track records rather than assumptions about their leadership style or personal commitments?

Flexible working arrangements can support women‘s participation and career continuity. Eduardo Schultz’s experience in Latin America highlights how long commutes, limited public transport and women‘s disproportionate share of family responsibilities can affect career opportunities. However, flexibility can also create a **„being-in-the-room paradox“**: while remote working enables women to remain in employment, it may reduce their visibility, access to informal networks and exposure to senior decision-makers.

Evidence from McKinsey and LeanIn.Org’s *Women in the Workplace 2025* report illustrates this challenge. Among women working remotely three or more days a week, 37% had received a promotion in the preceding two years, compared with 53% of those working on-site three or more days a week. The respective figures for having a sponsor were 37% and 54%. Among men, the differences between working arrangements were considerably smaller. Research by Susanne Wanger (2024), based on German workplace data, also found that family-friendly flexible working arrangements did not significantly improve working mothers’ chances of promotion to management positions.

The challenge for organisations is to ensure that flexibility does not come at the expense of career progression. Accountability means applying transparent standards fairly and ensuring equal access to challenging assignments, sponsorship and promotion, regardless of where or when people work. Ultimately, progress should be measured not only by representation, but by whether women advance into senior executive roles and positions of real influence.



From Potential to Action: What Women Can Do

While organisations must address structural barriers, women can also take an active role in shaping their own progression.

- **Adopt a proactive leadership mindset.** Do not wait to be invited or assume that good performance alone will bring recognition. Express your ambition, put yourself forward and take on challenging assignments.
- **Define your value proposition.** Be clear about the experience, expertise and perspective you bring, the challenges you can address and the value you create. Communicate your achievements and leadership impact with confidence.
- **Build relationships deliberately.** Develop connections with CEOs, board members, senior executives and peers, as well as through professional associations, chambers of commerce and networks such as VAB. Meaningful relationships can provide insight, visibility and access to opportunities.
- **Seek both mentors and sponsors.** Find people who will help you develop and challenge your thinking, while also building relationships with those who know your work and can advocate for you when relevant opportunities arise.
- **Create a plan for your next step.** Identify the sectors, organisations and roles that interest you. Understand the experience and capabilities they require: build your track record accordingly, keep your professional profile current, and follow up on opportunities rather than relying on chance.

These actions do not remove organisations' responsibility to ensure fair access. They help women approach their careers more intentionally while making their readiness and contribution visible to decision-makers.

From Representation to Real Opportunity

Moving beyond representation requires action from both sides. Women need to recognise their value, build relationships and pursue opportunities proactively. Organisations need to identify talent fairly, open access to meaningful leadership experiences and ensure that capable women are considered for positions of real influence.

Mentoring can help women prepare. Sponsorship can assist in ensuring they are considered. Flexible working arrangements can remove practical barriers, while accountability can turn commitments into sustained progress.

Ultimately, the objective is not simply to have more women represented in leadership. It is to ensure that talent is recognised, opportunity is accessible and leadership potential translates into meaningful responsibility and impact.

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Sources

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