

Still Climbing: Why women aren't advancing fast enough — and what organisations can do



International Women's Day webinar

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United Nations theme this year



- **Rights**
- **Justice**
- **Action**

for ALL women and girls

Discussion today

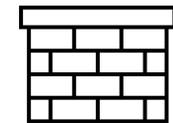
Still Climbing
(progress so far)



Why women aren't advancing enough
(slowing/ stagnating)



Barriers to advancement
(structural, cultural, lifecycle)



What organisations can do
(meaning you and I)



Progress so far

UK female employment rate higher than OECD average (72% over 63%)

More women with young children are in work than a decade ago

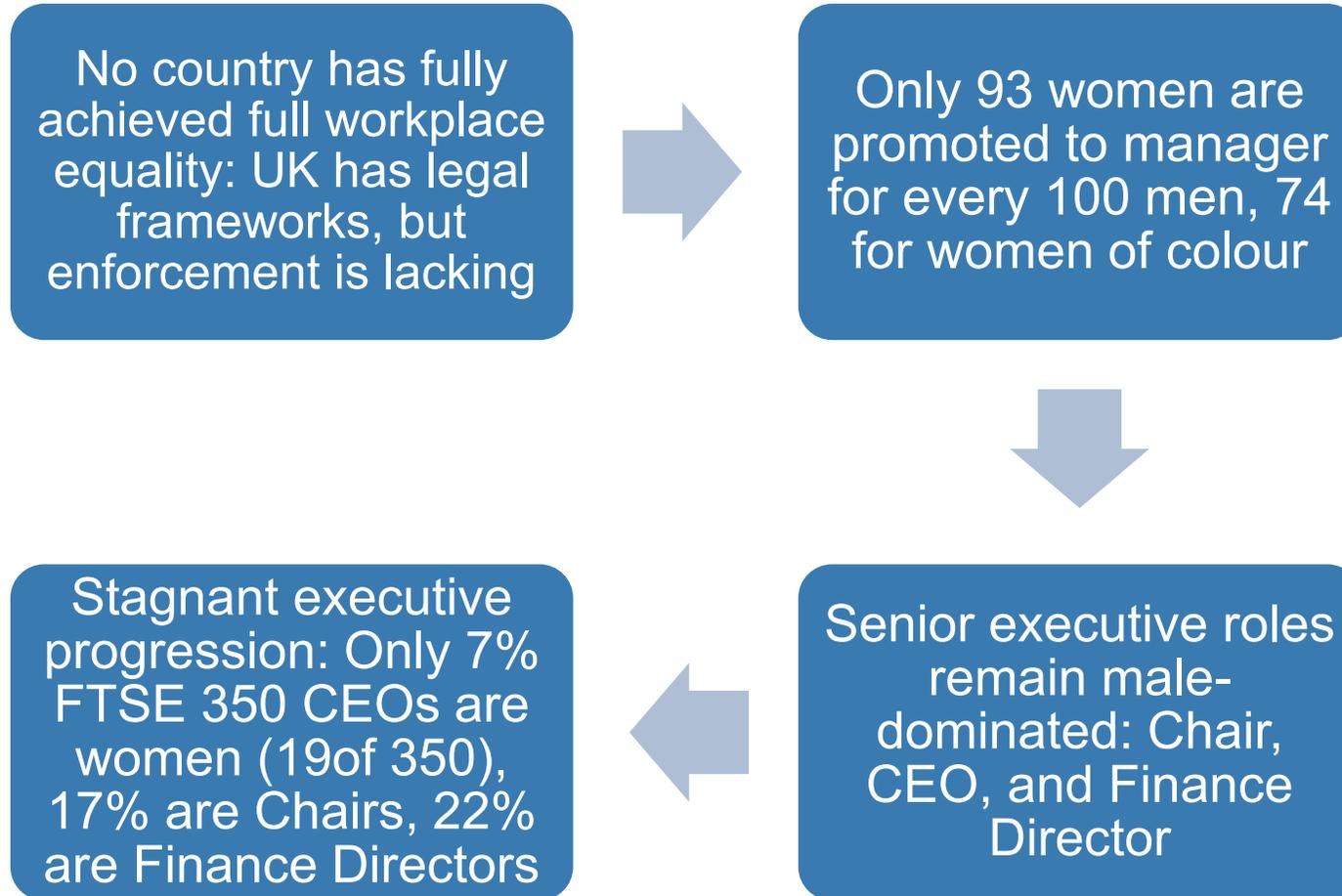
Women hold 43% of FTSE 350 non-executive board roles (up from 9.5% in 2011)

Over 70% of FTSE 350 companies met/exceeded target for women on boards.

Source: FTSE Women Leaders Review, 2025; Labour Force Survey data 2014-2024



Slowing...stagnating



Structural Barriers

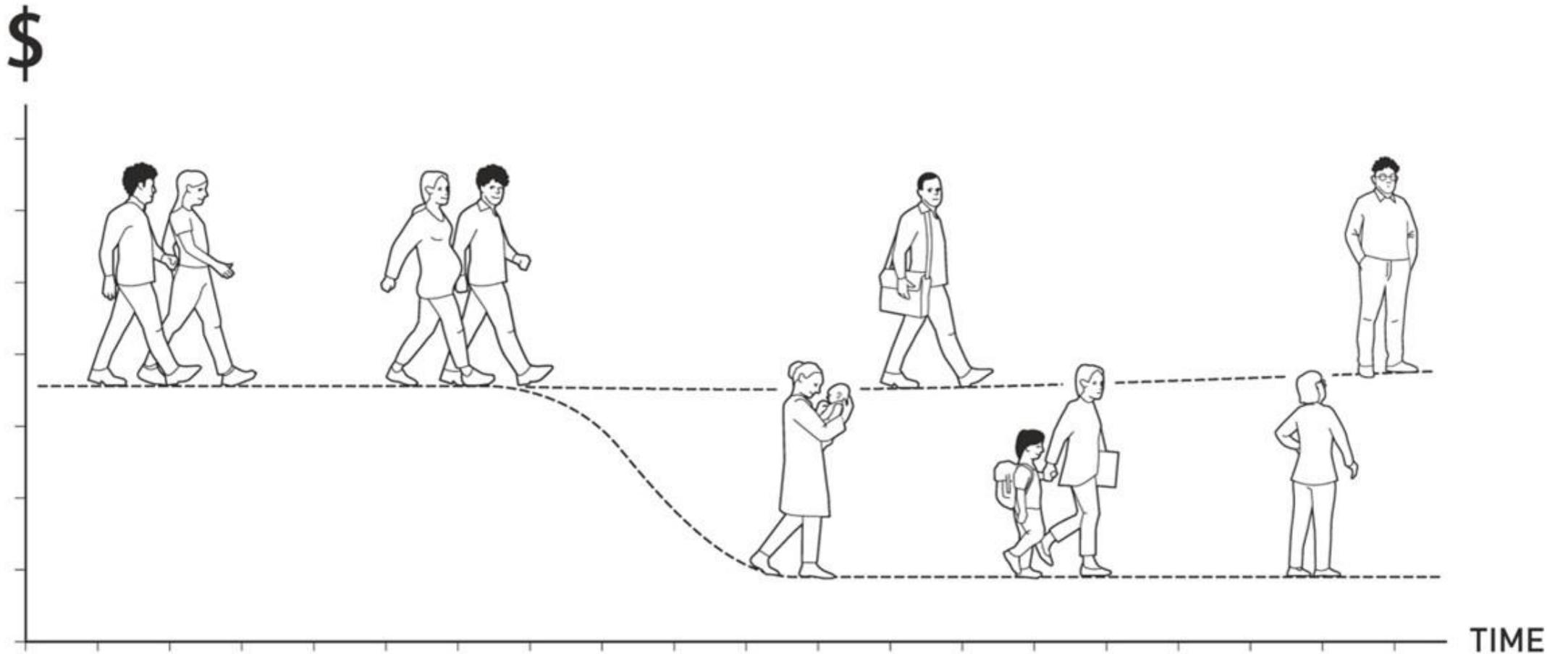
- 1 Underrepresentation:** in executive, decision-making roles that shape business strategy and direction
- 2 Broken rung:** more women in the pipeline is not enough
- 3 Sponsorship gap:** 45% of entry-level men have sponsors vs 31% of women at entry-level
- 4 Advancement gap:** falling career support and programs advancing women's development

Cultural and Lifecycle Barriers

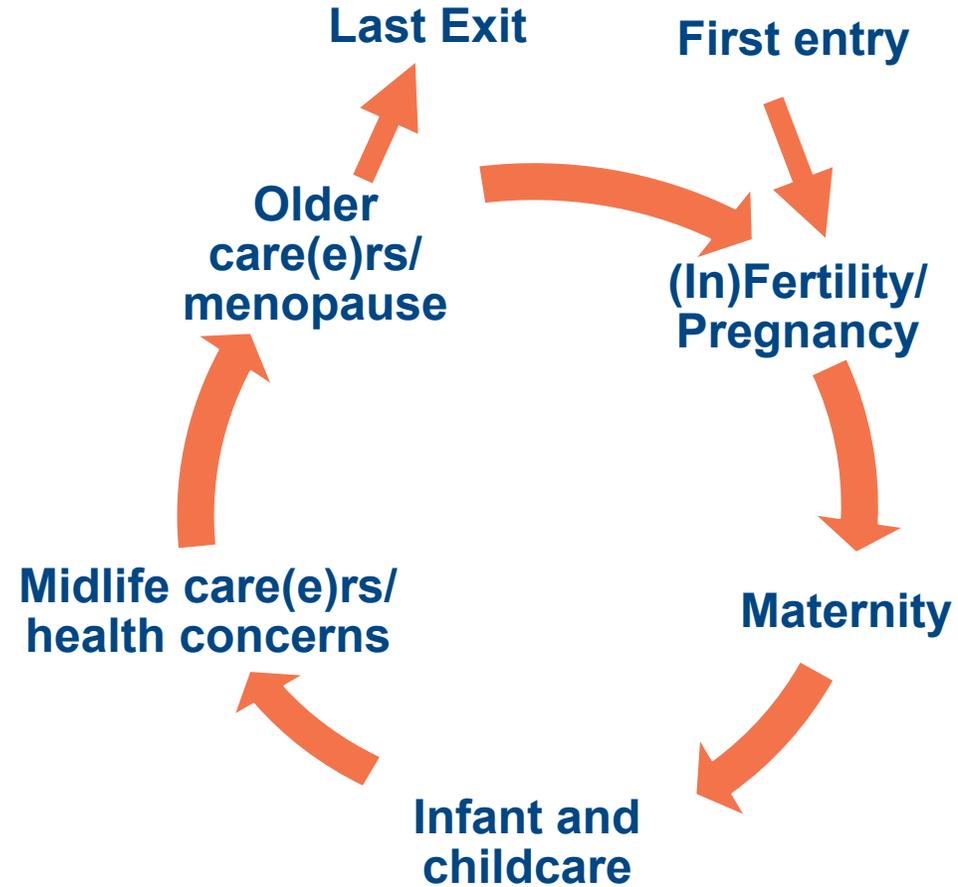
- 1 Mid-career bottlenecks: Care/career dilemmas** 
- 2 Double M challenge: Mental health and Menopause** 
- 3 Intersectional disadvantage: age, ethnicity, nationality** 
- 4 Limiting “inner conversations”** (Krishnan and Vishnu, 2025) 

Care/ers dilemma

Male breadwinner – female caregiver norms



Women's Career Lifecycle Approach (WCLA)



Conceptualised by Dr. Meenakshi Krishnan, IES, 2025

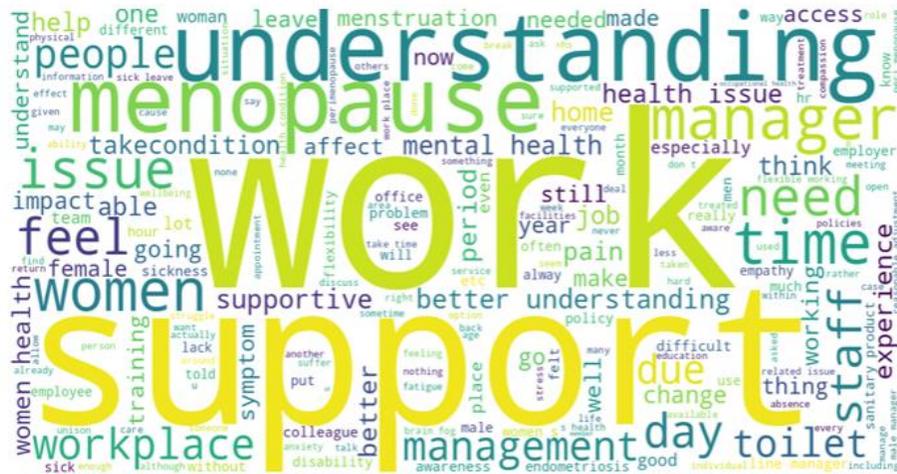


The Double M challenge

Survey of over-50s women finds almost two in three struggle with mental health

Menstruation, Menopause and Mental health: more women in the workforce suffering in silence

- 2 in 3 UK women aged 50+ struggle with mental health linked to menopause and midlife pressures.
- 90% do not seek help due to stigma, silence, or fear of being misunderstood.
- Common symptoms affecting work: brain fog, anxiety, sleep disruption, overwhelm, fatigue, memory lapses, loss of confidence.
- Up to 1/3rd experience severe menopause symptoms that impact their work day-to-day.
- Menopause symptoms are linked to workforce exits or reduced hours by mid-50s, according to longitudinal UK data.

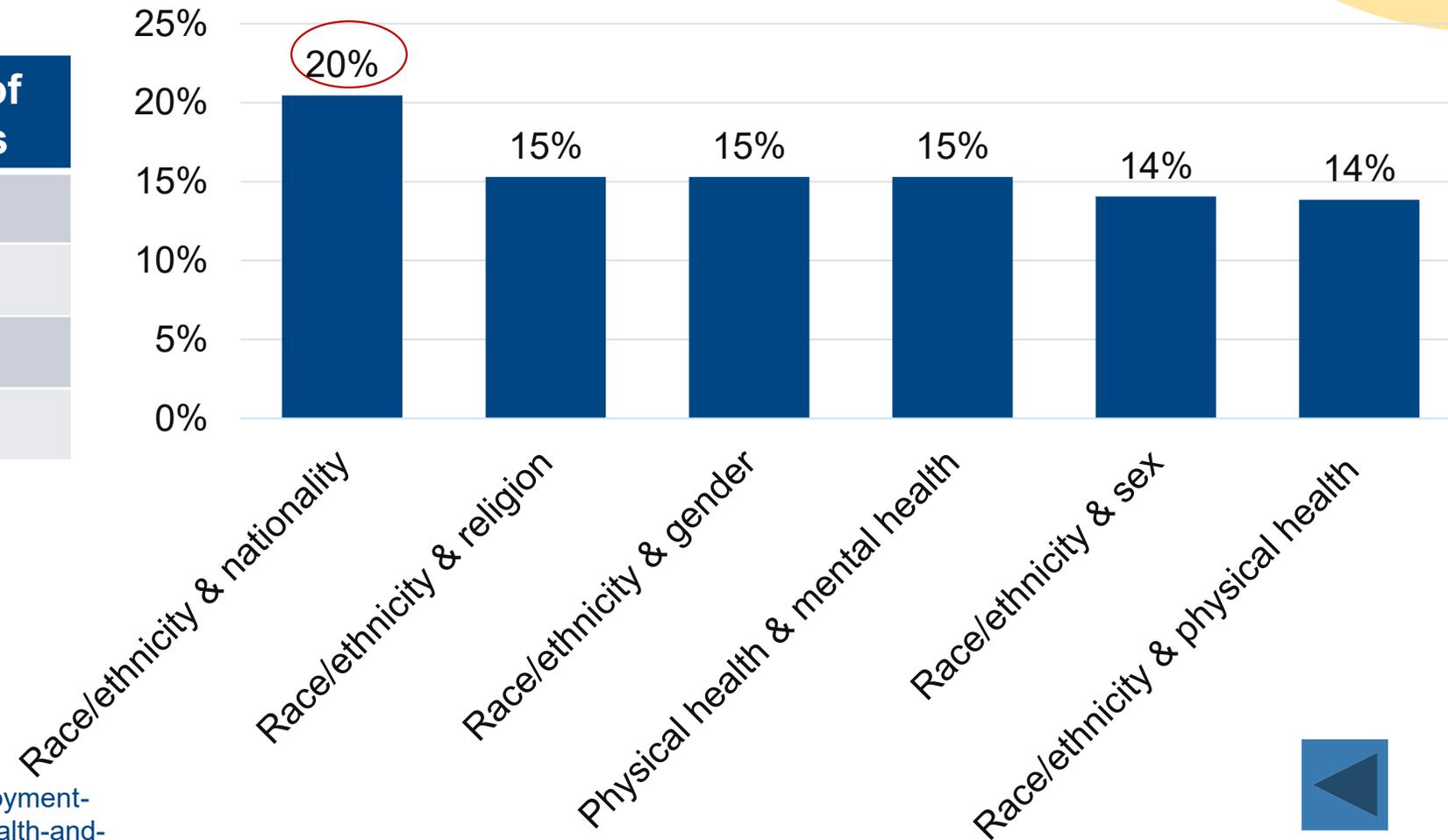


Source: [The Guardian](#), 2025; British Menopause Society; Unison, 2025



Intersectional disadvantage in health and social care

Combined discrimination	Percentage of respondents
1	32%
2	28%
3	15%
4+	25%



Source: Care Quality Commission, 2025, <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/tackling-workforce-inequalities-in-health-and-adult-social-care/>



Self-limiting Inner Conversations



Fragmented life roles

Women experience inner conflicts balancing professional and familial roles, leading to fragmented self-perception.

Self-limiting beliefs

Feelings of guilt and fear of inauthenticity create limiting beliefs like hiding true self or avoiding self-promotion.

Impact of social conditioning

Early social conditioning and patriarchal norms reinforce narratives that restrict women's leadership visibility and risk-taking.

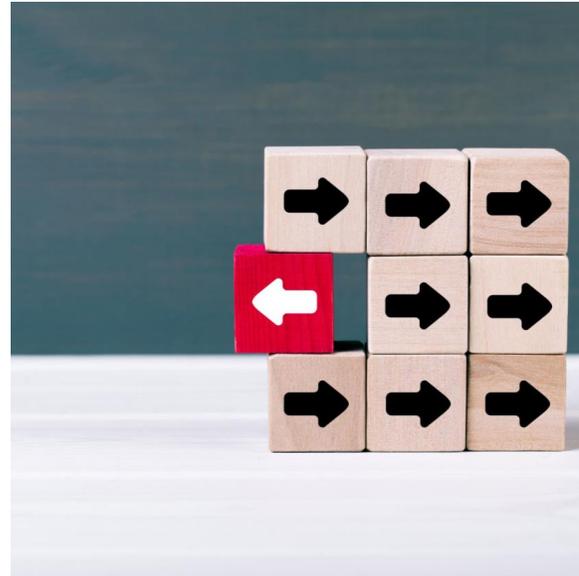
Interactive poll

“What are the top 3 barriers in your organisation?”

Mid-career bottlenecks
Care/career dilemmas

Broken rung

Advancement gap
Lack of career support



Underrepresentation
in executive roles

Sponsorship gap

Double M challenge

Self-limiting “inner conversations”



What can organisations do?



British Council case study

Enabling organisational factors:

Foster senior leadership support, buy-in and engagement

High-quality workforce data is accessible

Diversity Assessment Framework

Inclusive organisational culture

Ongoing feedback loops



Achieved Gender KPI of 50% women in global leadership roles

Actionable strategies (1/2)

1. Fix the “broken rung” structurally

- Introduce structured promotion criteria moderating manager discretion.
- Audit first-line manager promotions for gender disparities and intersectionality.
- Train panels to recognise “potential vs experience” bias.

2. Develop intentional sponsorship and career pathways

- Create sponsorship programmes where senior leaders sponsor mid-career women.
- Measure allyship and sponsorship outcomes: opportunities offered, promotions, and role visibility.
- Invest in sustained women’s development programs integrating self-reflection, reframing inner dialogue, career coaching, peer support, senior role models and accountability.

3. Redesign workplace support during high-load lifecycle stages

- Offer gender equalised care leave provisions.
- Encourage access to flexible working and predictable scheduling.
- Replace generic “support menopause” messaging with specifics: health benefits, workplace adjustment

Actionable strategies (2/2)

4. Boost line manager capability (they are the “linchpin”)

- Micro-training regularly on bias, menopause, and inclusive conversations
- Manager dashboards to show team development and progression metrics
- Encourage empathy and proactive discussion on lifecycle needs

5. Shift cultural gender norms

- De-stigmatise carers - normalise care by men, by all (spotlight men who take parental leave)
- Publish care-friendly working patterns from senior leaders
- Offer “career stabilisation” periods with temporary reduced load with no penalty

Keeping the Climb going – call to action



Stay Committed. Stay accountable. Stay courageous.

Sustained progress requires focus, transparency, and accountability to overcome stagnation and maintain momentum.

Be relentless about equity

Organisational action must protect gains, address inequities, and commit to systemic redesign for fairness.

Challenge norms through leadership and culture change

Leaders must reflect honesty, challenge norms, and invest courageously in change despite external pressures.

Build systems that match women's realities

Complement structural reforms with cultural change, and support women to thrive and shape the future workplace.





Any questions?

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Thank you

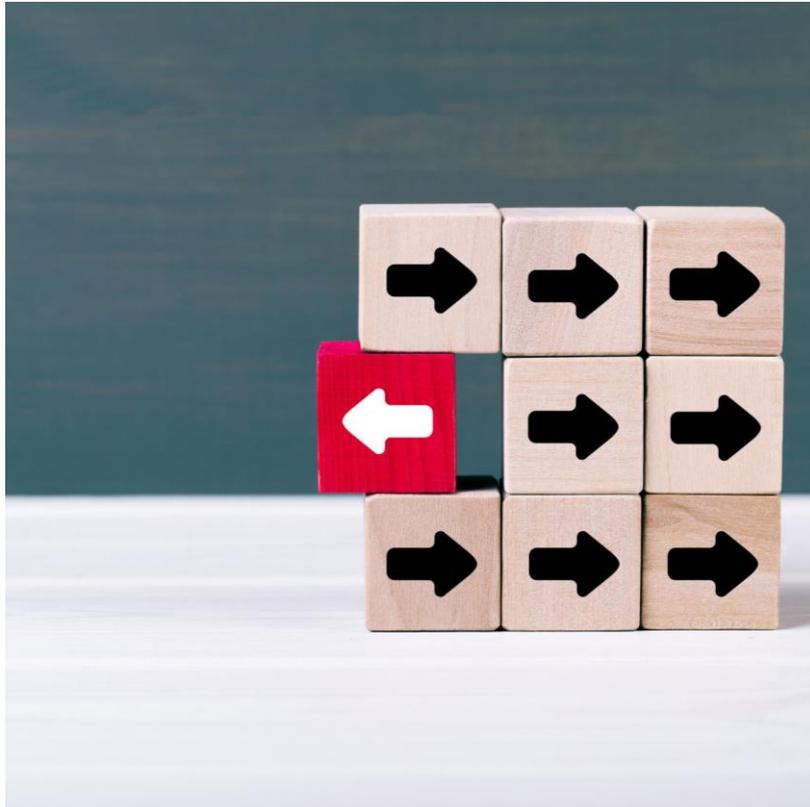
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Leading from Within



Power of Inner Conversations

Inner dialogues significantly influence women's leadership effectiveness and personal empowerment.

Articulate and Reframe Inner Dialogue

Expressing and understanding inner conversations within personal life experiences fosters insight to transform negative inner narratives into positive, empowering stories aligned with values.

Reclaiming Leadership Identity

Surfacing and reframing inner conversations helps women align leadership identity with their aspirations.

Complementing Structural Reforms

Inner conversations complement organizational reforms, fostering holistic gender equity pathways.