

# Women in leadership: time to move beyond intentions



**Dr Amanda Sterling, Leadership Coach and Consultant, shares insights from her latest research into where organisations should focus their attention to increase the representation of women in leadership.**

**S**even years ago, I was passed over for a leadership position because of assumptions made about me when I became a mum. That experience led me to pursue a doctorate and established my mission to understand why women continue to face barriers in leadership, and what workplaces can actually do about it, because, despite decades of investment and effort, we're still not seeing the traction we need.

## **PROBLEMS, CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL WINS**

**W**e're living in an age of wicked problems and complex challenges with no easy answers, where apparent solutions often create new ones. Navigating them requires people with different lived experiences and perspectives

to come together, ask the right questions and lead through uncertainty. Greater representation and inclusion of women in leadership is one of the better alternatives available to organisations grappling with this complexity.

The business case is well established. Companies with more diverse executive teams financially outperform others. Women improve team dynamics, decision-making and stakeholder perceptions, while bringing crucial consumer market insights.

Many senior leaders and HR professionals are already actively working on this by setting targets and investing resources. Some are making exceptional progress. The 30 per cent female chief executives in [Champions for Change](#)

organisations show what's achievable when improvement is actively prioritised. But the gaps remain significant. Only 12 per cent of chief executives of NZX 50 companies are women. According to **UN Women Gender Snapshot Reporting**, at the current pace, it will take another 140 years before women are equally represented in global decision-making. That's more time than most of us feel comfortable waiting.

So what's holding us back? Decades of research – academic and practitioner alike – offer clear insights into the gaps. Efforts have historically focused on 'fixing' women: building leadership capability, confidence and commitment. Academic research heavily critiques this approach for ignoring how deeply entrenched beliefs about women's roles, the nature of work, and who is considered credible in leadership continue to limit careers. Reporting from McKinsey (in particular) highlighted a **post-Covid exodus** we haven't recovered from. Their Women in the Workplace reporting across 2023 to 2025 described how the 'broken rung' remains unfixed: women are overworked and under-recognised, and have **fewer opportunities to advance due to declining commitment to women's progress**.

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### THE NEW ZEALAND CASE

The good news is that we now have a way forward that's genuinely different, focusing on solutions. Earlier this year, I surveyed 410 New Zealand women leaders to understand the factors most positively affecting their careers. The top four were manager support (48 per cent), flexible work arrangements (36 per cent), partner support (36 per cent) and leadership development programmes (32 per cent). For HR professionals, these findings point to four critical areas of action.

First, build awareness and then hold managers accountable for gender equity. Manager support is the single most impactful factor for women's career progression, and yet only 11 per cent of the workplaces hold managers accountable for delivering it. When you consider that men are – largely – still a majority in roles with power to make decisions about women's careers, allyship skills are critical. When men actively champion women's progression, the impact on organisational culture is significant. Closing this gap is essential for delivering the systemic change that representation targets alone cannot achieve.

Second, build outcomes-based cultures. Flexible work is the second most critical factor for women's careers, yet it remains inconsistently applied across organisations. Shifting from hours-based to outcomes-based expectations – measuring contribution rather than presence – creates conditions for women to progress without penalty. This benefits everyone.

Third, shift care-giving norms. My doctoral research revealed that mothers in leadership were going to extraordinary efforts to prove they remained capable and committed: on top of their leadership roles and family responsibilities. Role-modelling is central here. It's the leader asking a returning mother, "What do you need?". It's the dad who parents out loud, telling colleagues he's picking the kids up or unavailable during the holidays. It's not assuming who the primary carer is. Until we explicitly support mothers' experiences in leadership, we will continue to struggle with women's representation.

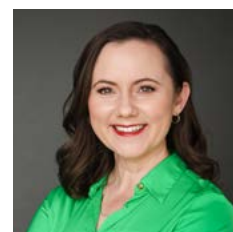
Fourth, continue to invest in opportunities for women to grow in a supportive environment. Leadership development ranked fourth among the most impactful factors (32 per cent). High-impact programmes provide self-awareness development, practical leadership skills

and, crucially, a community of peers who understand the unique pressures women face in leadership. This isn't about fixing women; it's about equipping them with the support networks and strategic capabilities to thrive despite systemic barriers, while we work to dismantle them.

### GOOD FOR WOMEN, GOOD FOR BUSINESS

We've come a long way in seven years, but we still have a long way to go. The research is clear: the strategies that will genuinely move us forward aren't about fixing women. They're about fixing the systems, cultures and norms that hold them back. More women in leadership isn't just good for women. It's good for business, and it's essential for solving the complex, wicked problems our organisations now face. The question is: what are you going to do to move beyond good intentions into impactful action?

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**Dr Amanda Sterling** is an award-winning consultant who partners with organisations to remove barriers for women in leadership. She combines decades of corporate leadership development experience with deep expertise in gender and inclusion to help organisations attract and retain women leaders and close gender pay gaps. Her groundbreaking doctorate and recent research in practice – the Four Factors for Women – revealed critical insights into what holds women back and what workplaces can do about it. Amanda's work has been featured in *NewsHub*, *The Press*, *The Dominion Post*, *NewsTalkZB*, *RNZ's The Panel*, and by *Global Women*, and the University of Auckland.