

The Power of Safe Spaces:

Why do Women's Only Leadership Programs Matter?



Introduction

Each year, Women & Leadership Australia works with hundreds of leaders across business, community and government organisations to improve gender equity in leadership.

Australian workplaces are increasingly seeking interventions to improve gender equity across their workforce and leadership. One strategy is to support more women to step into – and succeed in – leadership positions by delivering women's only leadership development programs.

We've gathered the latest research findings and data to shine a light on the power of women's only spaces and answer the question: **why do women's only leadership programs matter?**

This report explores three interlinked themes:

- **Setting the scene:** women's experiences in the workplace
- **Meaningful support:** how women's only leadership programs can help
- **Making it count:** maximising outcomes for gender equity

We share what we know about best practice advocacy so that organisations and individuals around the country can also benefit from these insights.



About Women & Leadership Australia

For 20 years, Women & Leadership Australia has been championing equity and empowering leaders in every aspect of life. We specialise in delivering high-impact, applied leadership development programs and events.

As Australia moves ahead on its path towards gender equality, Women & Leadership Australia is providing the training, resources, connections and thought leadership to support individuals and organisations on this journey.

Setting the scene: women's experiences in the workplace

Despite decades of advocacy and action, women still experience barriers and disadvantage in the workplace because of their gender.

Pay inequity

The Workplace Gender Equality Agency reports that the gender pay gap is a persistent feature in Australian workplaces, with an average total remuneration gender pay gap of 21.7% in 2023.¹ This means that for every dollar earned by men, women earn 78 cents.

While there have been some improvements in pay equity, progress is slow. 2023 results still show that every industry and almost three-quarters (73%) of employers have a gender pay gap of larger than 5% in favour of men.²

These earning differences compound over a woman's working life all the way to retirement.

Representation in senior leadership roles

Women remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles, and as the level of seniority increases, women's representation decreases. In Australia, women hold 42% of manager positions and just 22% of CEO positions. When it comes to boards, 34% of board members are women, and one in four boards have no women members.

With women still shouldering the majority of unpaid caring duties at home, a lack of flexible work arrangements is just one of many systemic barriers that keep women out of leadership positions. While 30% of women work part time, only 7% of management roles are part-time, making it harder for women to move into management.

Sex discrimination at work

Sex discrimination in employment occurs when someone is treated less favourably because of characteristics such as their sex, gender identity, marital status, family responsibilities, pregnancy or breastfeeding.³ Recent research suggests that 1 in 2 women have experienced gender-based discrimination in the workplace.⁴

Our own research with women in Australian schools found that 2 in 5 respondents (41%) had experienced barriers or discrimination within a school, because of their gender. Those who had experienced gender discrimination described examples of male tribalism, ageism, gender bias, racism and stereotypes.⁵

Sexual harassment at work

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, 2 in 5 Australian women (41%) have experienced workplace sexual harassment in the last 5 years. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, young women and members of the LGBTIQ+ community, these rates are even higher. Most sexual harassment in Australian workplaces is carried out by men.⁶

Workplace sexual harassment not only causes negative mental health impacts for those who experience it – business productivity is also significantly affected, with one report estimating a cost \$2.6 billion in lost productivity.⁷

¹Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), "Gender Equality Scorecard 2022-23", (2023): <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/australias-gender-equality-scorecard>

²WGEA, "Gender Equality Scorecard 2022-23"

³Australian Human Rights Commission, "Sex Discrimination": <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/employers/sex-discrimination>

⁴Committee for Economic Development of Australia, "Women in Leadership: Understanding the gender gap," (2023): <https://www.ceda.com.au/NewsAndResources/News/Leadership-Diversity-Inclusion/MEDIA-RELEASE-CEDA-survey-finds-many-women-discrim>

⁵Women & Leadership Australia, "Women in Australian schools: Unsupported, overlooked and exhausted," (2023): <https://www.wla.edu.au/post/2023-schools-report/>

⁶Australian Human Rights Commission, "Time for respect: Fifth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces", (2022): <https://humanrights.gov.au/time-for-respect-2022>

⁷Deloitte Access Economics, "The economic costs of sexual harassment in the workplace," (2020): <https://www.deloitte.com/au/en/services/economics/perspectives/economic-costs-sexual-harassment-workplace.html>

Key concepts

Equality and equity

While these terms are often used interchangeably, equity and equality mean different things and lead to different results.

- Equality is about treating everyone the same – it relates to providing the same resources and rules for everyone
- Equity recognises that different people experience different barriers, and may need different resources and rules to achieve the same outcomes as other people.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality refers to the ways different aspects of a person's identity, such as their gender, sexuality, disability, socio-economic status, cultural background etc, can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Intersectionality shows us that while all women are subject to gender-based discrimination and disadvantage, some women are affected even more harshly due to other aspects of diversity.

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I would highly recommend [the program] to women in any industry and especially those that work in male dominated industries. The tools this program equipped us with is uniquely tailored for women by women to maximise our impact. As a proud feminist, I love to see all things equal, but embrace the fact that we all have core differences in the way we make decisions and are perceived as leaders. I feel grateful, humbled and incredibly gratified that I had this opportunity to be part of this journey.

Renee

Women & Leadership Australia program participant



● 2023 Melbourne Symposium

Meaningful support: how women's only leadership programs can help

Australian workplaces are increasingly seeking interventions to improve gender equity across their workforce and leadership. One strategy is to support more women to step into – and succeed in – leadership positions by delivering women only leadership development programs.

Benefits at a glance

When women's only leadership programs are done well, they provide important opportunities for women to become better equipped for the challenges of senior leadership roles, and provide safe spaces to surface and address bias.

Benefits to participant include:

- Increased leadership aspirations
- Increased confidence and sense of agency
- Expanded networks and increased sponsorship
- Strengthened skills and self-awareness
- Better understanding of organisational structure and processes.

For businesses, benefits of well-facilitated women's only leadership programs provide:

- Higher promotion and retention rates
- Clear public demonstration of their commitment to gender equity.

Key concepts

Well-facilitated women's only leadership programs eliminate:

Sexism

Negative practices and assumptions in the workplace that impact people's performance, sense of belonging, mental health and job satisfaction

Maninterrupting

Research shows men are 3 times as likely to interrupt women as they interrupt other men, and that they are socialised from childhood to use speech to establish authority

Mansplaining

Men explaining things to women in a condescending or patronising way

Manspreading

Men taking up physical space to assert authority

Bropropriating

Men appropriating and taking the credit for women's ideas

Creating safe spaces for women

Research shows that women often don't feel as safe at work as men.

Safe learning spaces are important as they offer participants an environment for sharing experiences and taking emotional risks that they might not be willing to do in mixed-gendered contexts, helping them learn and grow.

Significant research shows the benefits of ensuring a safe environment for women to explore their potential, share successes and failures, and receive feedback, mentoring and coaching. This does not necessarily happen in mixed-gender training programmes, where women feel less free to share concerns unique to them.

A sense of psychological safety is also important for facilitating peer-exchange, as it allows for exchange of experiences, challenges, and best practices to collaboratively work on solutions in a safe and stimulating environment.

Key concepts

Psychological safety

Psychological safety is a belief that people will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with their ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. According to the Harvard Business Review, in a psychologically safe workplace:

- team members feeling more engaged and motivated, because they feel that their contributions matter and that they're able to speak up without fear of retribution
- people can make better decisions, as people feel more comfortable voicing their opinions and concerns, which often leads to a more diverse range of perspectives being heard and considered
- a culture of continuous learning and improvement can flourish, as team members feel comfortable sharing their mistakes and learning from them.

Challenging gendered norms around leadership

In many workplaces, leadership traits are still defined by stereotypically masculine leadership behaviour, such as authoritative decision making, control, and corrective action.⁸ This reinforces outdated biases that suggest that women are not naturally suited to leadership roles.⁹

Despite the fact that women more frequently exhibit leadership traits that are applicable to future global challenges like participative decision-making and people development,¹⁰ unconscious bias around traditionally 'male' leadership behaviours make it harder for women to be seen – or to see themselves – as leaders.¹¹

Delivering tangible and visible action

Increasingly, Australian organisations are looking for tangible and effective strategies to narrow their gender pay gap and improve gender equity in their workforce and leadership. With significant evidence pointing to the tangible benefits of women's only leadership programs, there is increasing demand for these programs.

By promoting women's only leadership programs, workplaces can also publicly demonstrate their commitment to gender equity to employees, stakeholders and the public.

⁸Natacha Catalino and Kirstan Marnane, "When women lead, workplaces should listen," in McKinsey Quarterly, (2019): <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/when-women-lead-workplaces-should-listen>.

⁹Hermينيا Ibarra, Robin J. Ely, and Deborah M. Kolb, "Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers," in Harvard Business Review (2013): <https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers>.

¹⁰Catalino and Marnane, "When women lead, workplaces should listen."

¹¹Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, "Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers."

Making it count: maximising outcomes for gender equity

Gender equity in the workplace is a complex and systemic challenge. Offering women's only leadership programs alone cannot deliver all the changes needed. There are a range of considerations that can help maximise the impact and ensure lasting positive change.

A holistic approach reduces risks

Offering women's only leadership programs without broader efforts to address workplace gender inequity may have the following risks:¹²

- It may imply women are deficient and need fixing, reinforcing stereotypes
- It may add to the mental labour on women on top of existing work demands
- It may be wrongly attributed to women's inability to compete with men
- It may be perceived as disingenuous, performative allyship.

High quality programs ensure success

Research suggests that not all women's only leadership programs are equal. There are some key success factors that are needed for a successful program.¹³

A skilled facilitator is needed to establish shared norms and ensure psychological safety. The program should provide participants with opportunities to apply their insights into real-life practice, for example through work-based projects.

In the workplace, successful change initiatives should be embedded in women's programs and work. For example, time should be allocated for participants to reflect on, and plan how they intend to integrate and apply their learnings.

Programs should be regularly evaluated and refined to measure and maximise impact.

Gender equity is everyone's responsibility

It's important that organisations include leaders of all genders on the path towards equity.

Male leaders should participate in training to build their gender intelligence, inclusive leadership skills and ability to recognise and respond to issues such as gender discrimination, unconscious bias and intersectional disadvantage. They should be given opportunities to listen to and learn from their female colleagues.¹⁴

Managers should be accountable for the development of their staff. Where appropriate, managers should sponsor women to attend leadership training, and provide opportunities for them to apply their new skills and learnings in the workplace, for example through stretch assignments or promotions.¹⁵

More generally, male allies can also show their support by spotlighting women's achievements and contributions, speaking up about women's potential and performance when they're not in the room, and publicly supporting women in senior leadership roles.¹⁶

¹²W. Brad Johnson, David G. Smith, and Heather Christensen, "Where Women's Leadership Development Programs Fall Short," in Harvard Business Review (2023): <https://hbr.org/2023/03/where-womens-leadership-development-programs-fall-short>

¹³United Nations System Staff College, "Faculty View: What makes for a successful Women's-Only Leadership programme?," (2021): <https://www.unssc.org/news-and-insights/blog/faculty-view-what-makes-successful-womens-only-leadership-programme>

¹⁴Johnson, Smith and Christensen, "Where Women's Leadership Development Programs Fall Short."

¹⁵Johnson, Smith and Christensen, "Where Women's Leadership Development Programs Fall Short."

¹⁶Johnson, Smith and Christensen, "Where Women's Leadership Development Programs Fall Short."

How we can support you

At Women & Leadership Australia, we're the experts in leadership development across the public, private and education sectors.

Our women's only programs support the development of women leaders at all levels. Our research shows that women who participate in our programs increase their leadership skills and develop the confidence to take on a more senior leadership role.

We offer short courses and customised workshops for leaders of all genders, across a range of topics including inclusive leadership, wellbeing and resilience, and mentoring.



Thinking on the level of understanding of what a Leader really is, I can see a great deal of advancement in myself as well as my fellow peers thanks to the course. It clearly sets you on a path of self-analysis and development that is essential to reach the skills that we need to become Leaders in our own right. Every time that the group gathers for a subject discussion or for the activities that are part of the webinars, are times when we all get substantial insights and thought provoking ideas that assist all of us in shifting the focus towards a potential team led by us. The course also facilitates a network of fellow women that are with you in the journey allowing you a safe environment to grow beyond the duration of the course. Definitely time and money well spent.

Laura

Women & Leadership Australia program participant

Contact us

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