



# Strengthening representation on boards and executive teams

## Joan Kirner Emerging Leaders Program

**Kate James**, Institute of Community Directors Australia

Thursday 13 November 2025



# Acknowledgement of Country

Emily Kam Kngwarray, *Ntang Dreaming*

1989, Utopia, Central Desert, Northern Territory  
Synthetic polymer, paint on canvas  
National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri/Canberra, purchased 1989  
© Emily Kam Kngwarray/Copyright Agency  
<https://nga.gov.au/exhibitions/emily-kam-kngwarray-paintings-from-utopia/>



# What we'll cover today:

- The importance of gender diversity in leadership
- Best practice for:
  - Recruitment
  - Retention
  - Career progression
- Strategies to increase diverse representation

# What do we mean by gender inclusion in leadership?

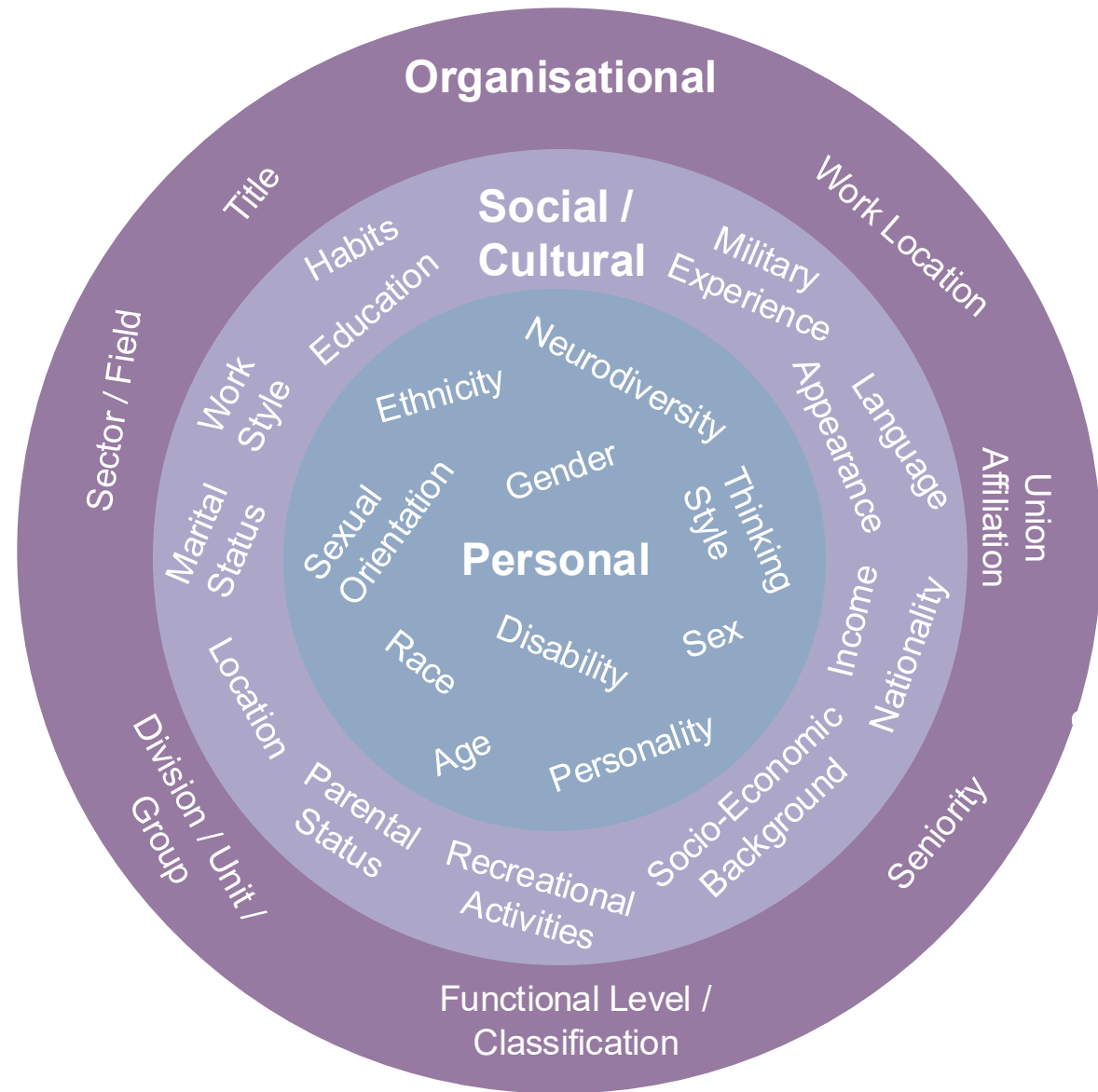
*Actively ensuring that people of all genders, especially those historically underrepresented, are not just present but meaningfully supported and empowered to lead*



**“We need to focus on diversity. I want you to hire more people who look different, but think just like me.”**

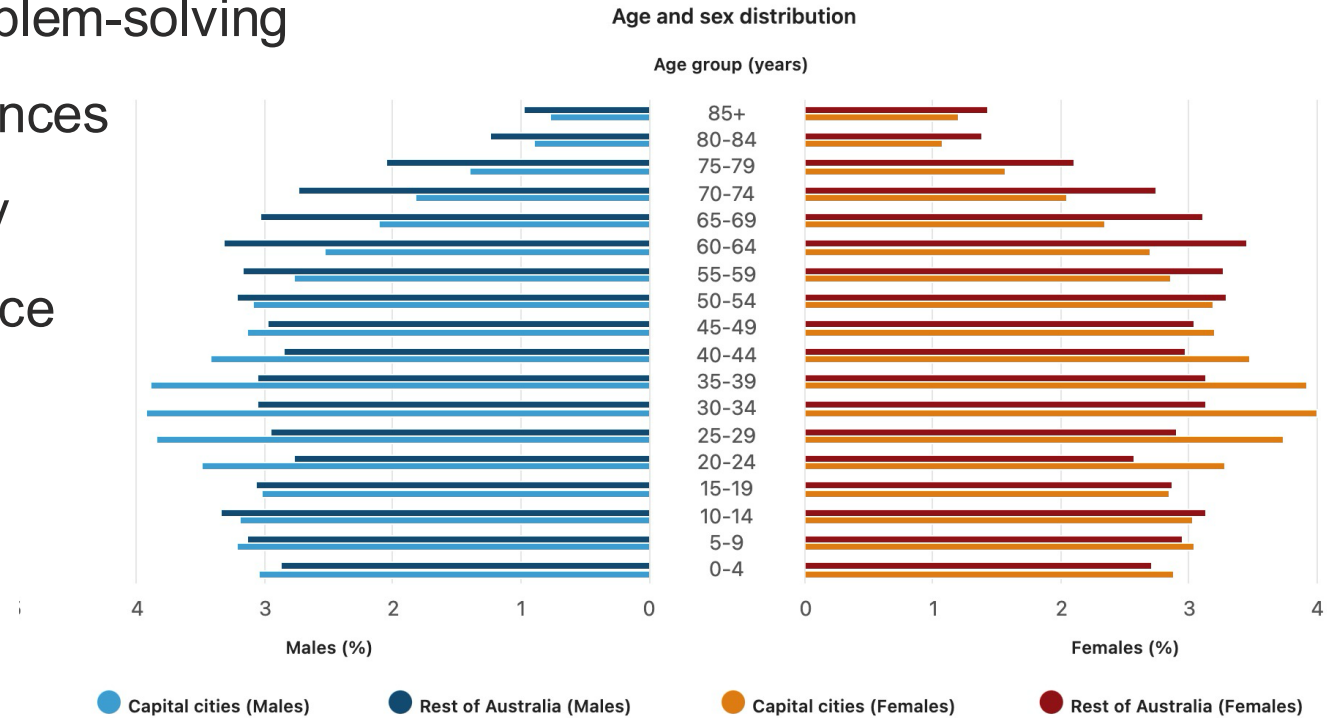
# The diversity wheel

*Adapted from Marilyn Loden*



# Why is gender diversity in leadership important?

- Stronger decision-making and problem-solving
- Different perspectives and experiences
- Increased innovation and creativity
- Stronger organisational performance
- Reflects the community
- Attracting and retaining talent
- Equity, inclusion and ethics
- Representation and visibility

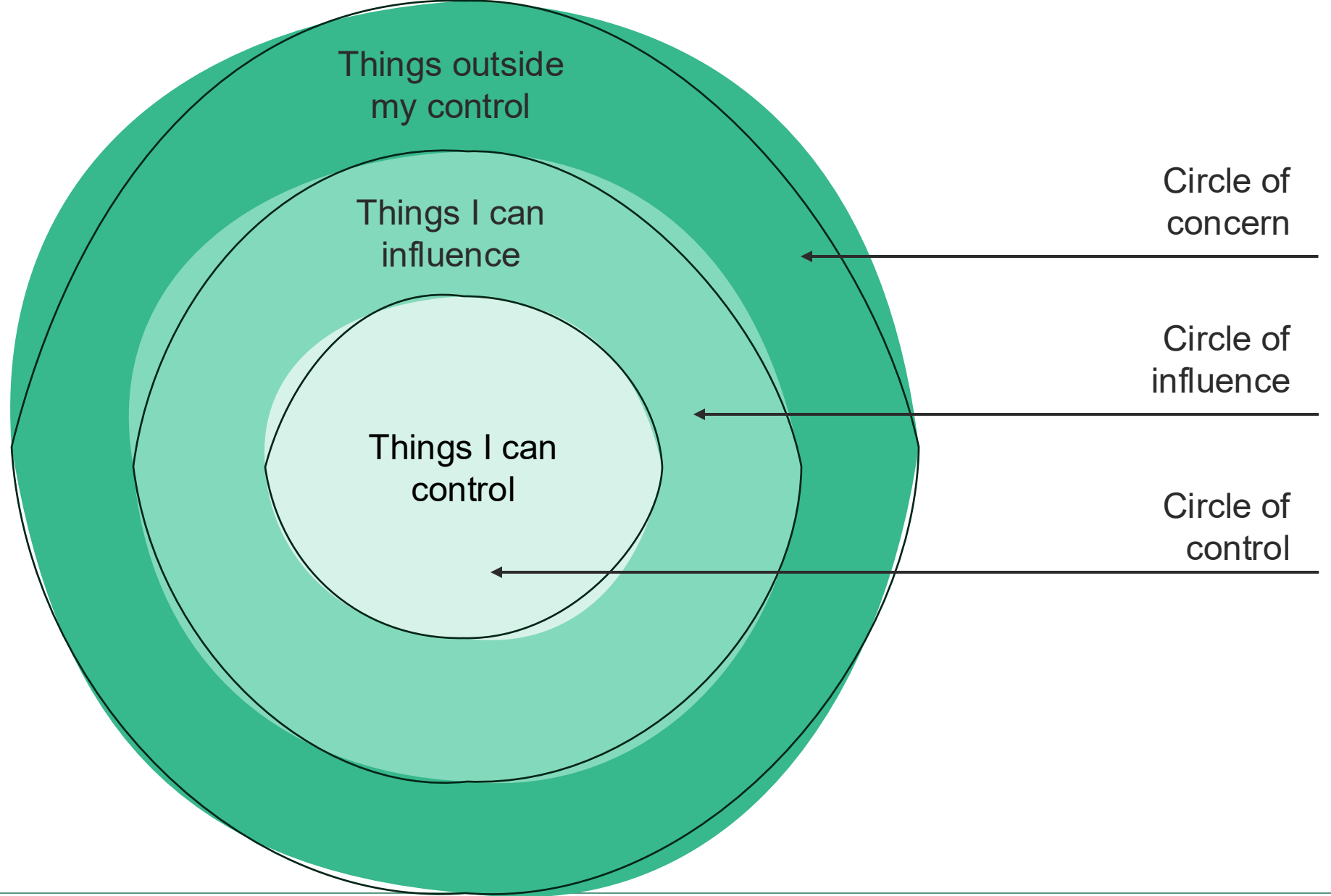


Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Regional population by age and sex 2022.

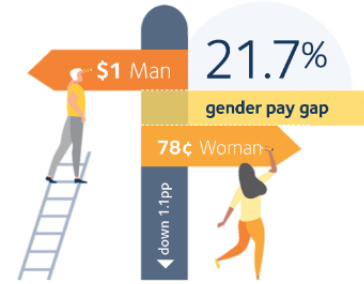
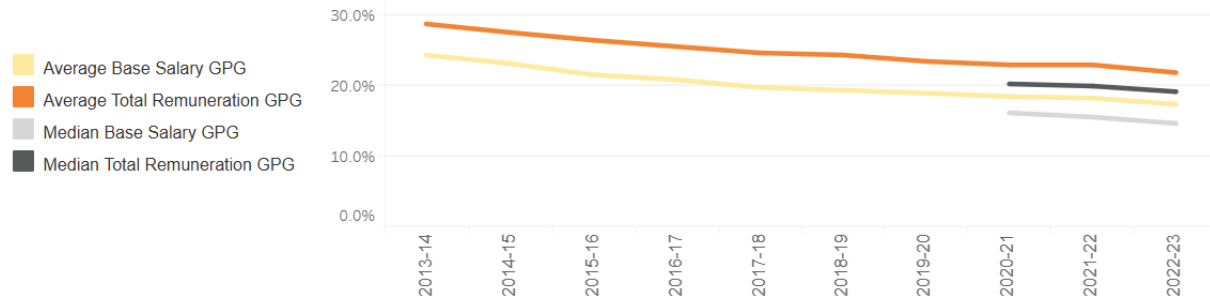
**Questions to ask yourself:**

What can I do?

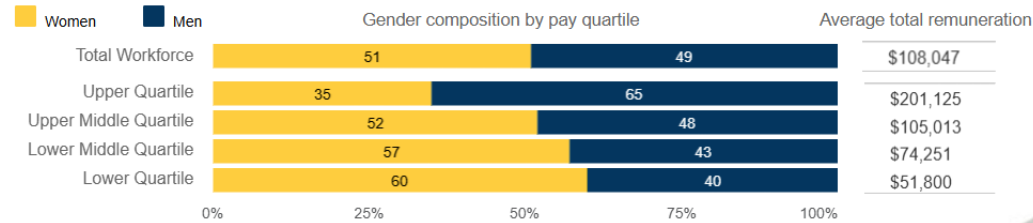
What is within my control or influence?



## Equal Remuneration: The Gender Pay Gap



**55%** of employers conducted a payroll analysis, and of those, **60%** acted on the result



## Boards and Governing Bodies

**26%** of boards do not have any women members

**19%**  
of Chairs  
are women



**34%**  
of board  
members  
are women

**25%** of boards are gender balanced (at least 40% men and women)

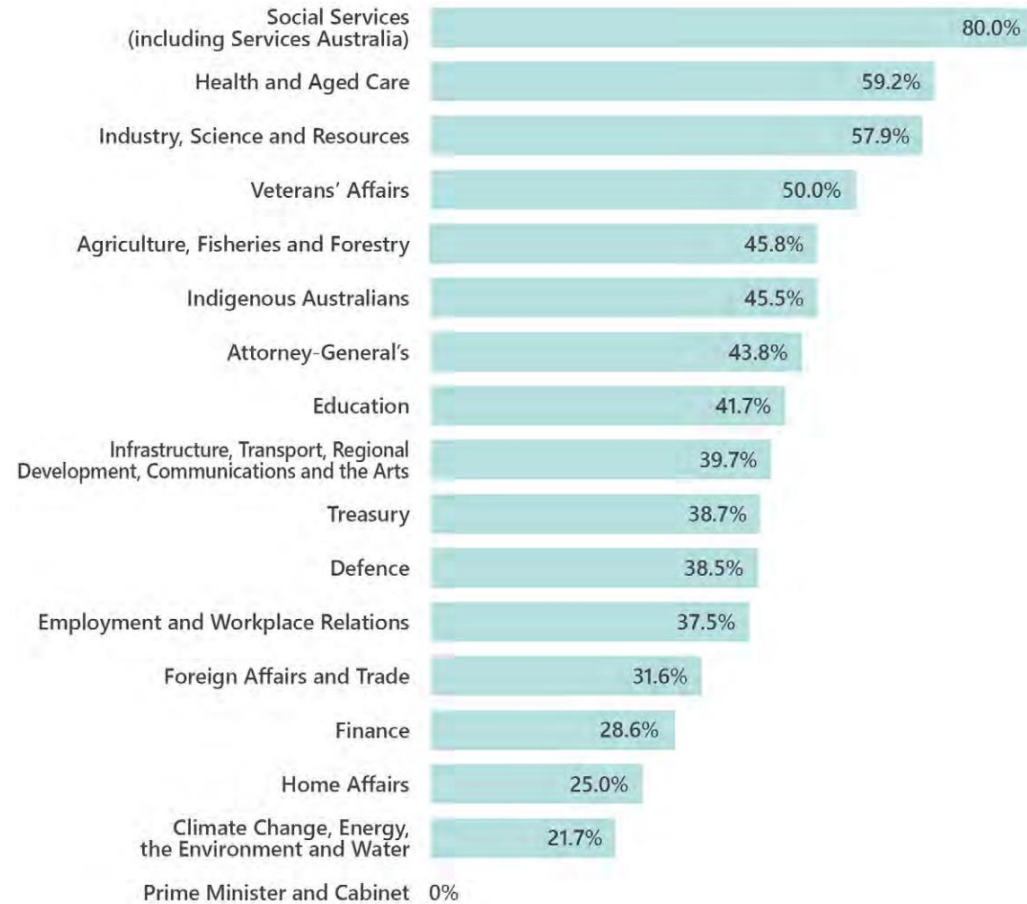
Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) published 27 February 2024

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/Data-Explorer/2023-data-archive>

**... what about other genders?**

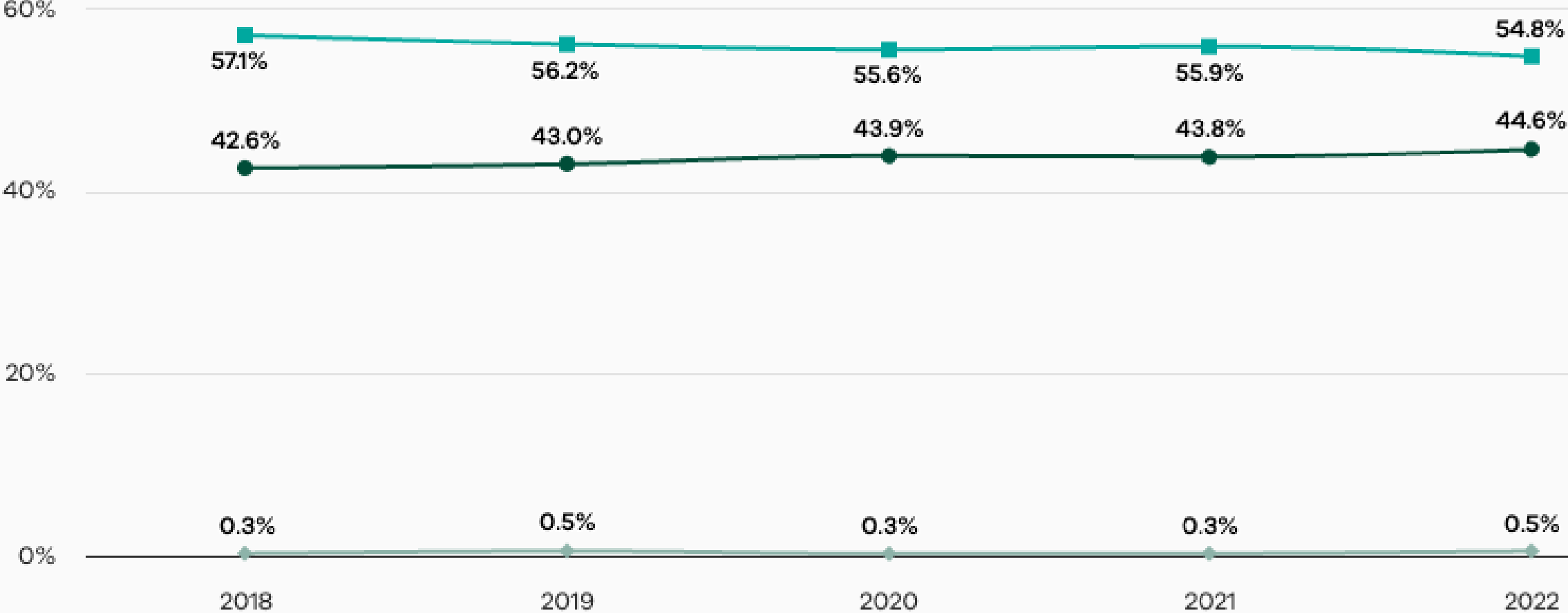


**Figure 2: Percentage of reportable Chair and Deputy Chair positions filled by women, as at 30 June 2023**



# Gender of board members over time

2018 to 2022



Man Prefer not to say Woman

## According to the VPSC's breakdown of board member demographics:



- **2%** identify as a person with disability
- **2%** identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- **19%** identify as culturally or linguistically diverse
- **77%** are regional and rural residents
- **82%** are volunteers

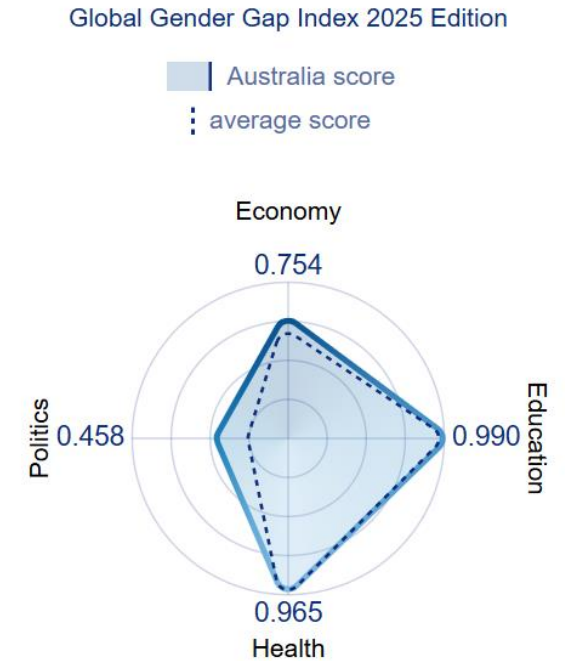


## Progress?

- Invisibility and exclusion
- Misrepresentation
- Perpetuation of power imbalances
- Overlooking intersectionality
- Failure to address systemic issues

# Barriers to gender inclusion in leadership

- Unconscious bias
- Exclusion from informal networking and decision-making
- Inadequate mentoring and development
- Resistance to change
- Tokenism without meaningful inclusion
- Inflexible policies
- Pay inequity
- Unsupportive organisational culture
- Lack of role models and representation
- Broader cultural and social barriers



[World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Index 2025](#)

# Examples of unconscious bias



## Confirmation bias

The tendency to search for information that confirms our preconceptions



## Attribution substitution

Using a simple attribute to make a complex judgment



## Affinity bias

The tendency to favour people with similarities to oneself



## Illusory correlation bias

Believing a relationship exists between two subjects, when in fact no relationship exists



## Availability heuristic

Being influenced by things that come to mind easily



## Intuition bias

The tendency to make decisions based on gut feelings rather than evidence or rational thinking

# What can we do?

01

**Advocate** for the collection of intersectional data and representation in leadership roles

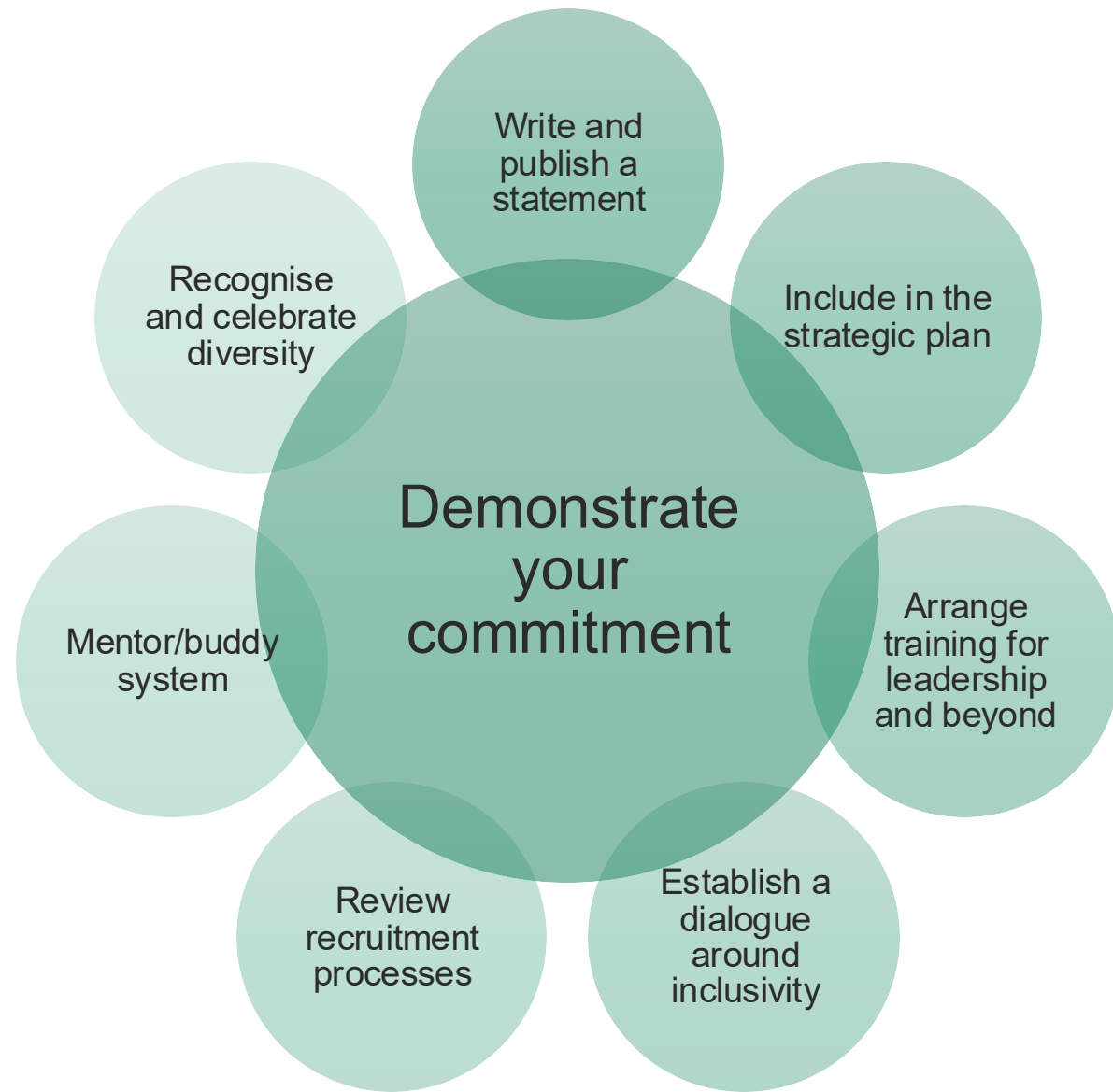
02

**Apply** an intersectional lens when actioning gender equality

03

**Strengthen** intersectional community and stakeholder engagement

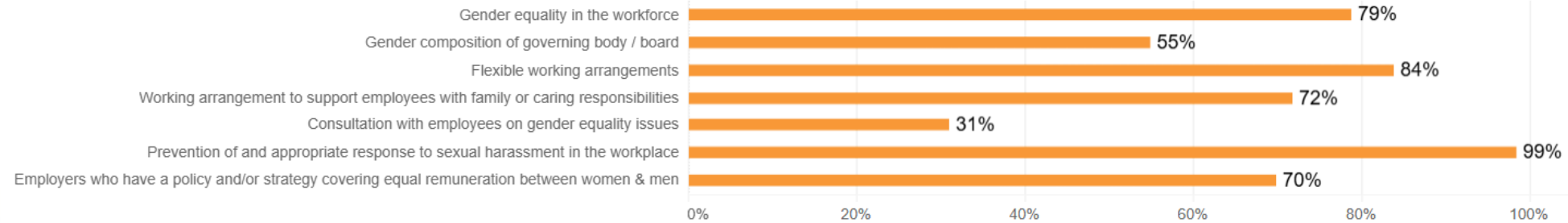
# Advancing gender equity at your organisation





## Employer Policies and Strategies

Employer gender equality policies and strategies adopted



## Paid Parental Leave

63% of employers offer employer-funded parental leave



The average length of paid universally available or primary carer parental leave is **12 weeks**



14% of all paid primary carer parental leave taken is taken by men

86% of employers that offer paid parental leave pay superannuation on PPL

Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) published 27 February 2024

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/Data-Explorer/2023-data-archive>

# Recruitment, retention and progression

## Step 1: Lay the groundwork

- Review your policies, structure and practices with an inclusivity lens to make sure nothing unintentionally limits participation or diversity.
- Consider establishing a committee with a clear commitment to equity and inclusion
- Link diversity and inclusion to strategy and set goals for gender and other underrepresented groups

## Step 2: Recruit with intention

- Assess existing skills, experience and diversity
- Actively succession plan
- Expand your recruitment pool
- Clearly define roles and expectations
- Follow your governance requirements while also providing members with clear information on nominees and the value they bring to the board

## Step 3: Create pathways for participation

- Offer flexible meeting times, hybrid options
- Remove barriers to involvement, regardless of their circumstances
- Provide training and mentoring

## Step 4: Welcome and support

- Provide a warm, inclusive induction
- Pair new members with a mentor who understands inclusive leadership
- Offer training and leadership opportunities to support progression into senior roles

## Step 5: Build a culture that retains talent

- Foster a respectful, inclusive culture where every voice is valued
- Promote psychological safety
- Actively identify and address instances of bias or exclusion
- Seek feedback and check in regularly to learn how you can keep improving

*“All  
appointments  
are merit-based”*

*“The role  
requires a  
certain level of  
experience”*


*“There weren’t  
many women or  
gender diverse  
candidates”*

# Board skills matrix





***“I don’t have  
the right skills  
or experience”***



***“I don’t have  
space to take  
on more  
responsibility”***



***“I’m  
uncomfortable  
with self-  
promotion”***

# Finding opportunities

- Cultivate new contacts
- Leverage existing networks
- Join a board
- Mentoring and development opportunities
- Tell people you're interested
- Ask others about their experiences
- Raise your profile
- Be generous – support goes both ways



## Board Positions

### Search

Keyword

### Type of Board:

Select Type of Board

### Interests:

Select Interest

### State:

Select State

### Local Government Area:

Select Local Government Area

### Sort

Recently Added ▾

### ONDRU

Posted on 06/03/2024

**Role:** Chair | **Location:** Victoria

**Community Sector:** [Arts and culture](#) [Human rights](#)

**Annual Budget:** \$10,001-\$25,000

**Number of Paid Staff:** 0

**Number of Volunteers:** 21-100

**Current Board Size:** 4-7

**Board Meetings (frequency):** monthly

**Board Meetings Held:** At Night

### Vermont South Neighbourhood House

Posted on 06/03/2024

**Role:** General Board Member | **Location:** Victoria, Whitehorse City Council

**Community Sector:** [Community development](#) [Education](#)

**Annual Budget:** \$250,001-\$750,000

**Number of Paid Staff:** 11 - 20

**Number of Volunteers:** 6-20

**Current Board Size:** 4-7

**Board Meetings (frequency):** monthly

**Board Meetings Held:** At Night

### Bereaved Parent Support NT Inc t/as Amber NT

Posted on 05/03/2024

**Role:** Secretary | **Location:** City of Darwin, Northern Territory

**Community Sector:** [Unknown or not classified](#)

**Annual Budget:** \$75,001-\$250,000

**Current Board Size:** 4-7

<https://www.communitydirectors.com.au/board-positions>

# How do you search for board positions?

- Institute of Community Directors Australia (ICDA) Board Matching Service  
<https://www.communitydirectors.com.au/board-positions>
- NSW Government boards  
<https://boards.dpc.nsw.gov.au/why-join-a-nsw-government-board-or-committee/>
- Women On Boards register  
<https://www.womenonboards.net/en-au/board-positions/about-our-vacancy-board>





# Government programs

## State governments

- <https://www.women.nsw.gov.au/strategies/women-and-work/women-on-boards>
- <https://www.boards.vic.gov.au/>
- <https://officeforwomen.sa.gov.au/womens-policy/womens-leadership/women-on-boards-and-committees>
- <https://www.justice.qld.gov.au/about-us/services/women-violence-prevention/women/boards>

## Federal government

- <https://www.boardlinks.gov.au/>
- <https://www.wgea.gov.au/women-in-leadership>

**BOARD:LINKS**

Equals success

# What are the benefits of a mentor / mentee relationship?

- Discuss issues and challenges
- Give practical suggestions
- Offer alternative approaches
- Share your knowledge
- Build your self-confidence
- Help crystallise priorities and develop action plans
- Provide insights about working with boards
- Discuss different ways to effectively manage performance
- Decrease feelings of isolation





## Friend-tors are absolutely a thing!

Unlike mentors who may be very senior, friend-tors can be peers or just a few rungs ahead on the career ladder.

You may be able to relate more closely, and friend-tors are likely to have more time and resources available than a busy senior executive.

**Up next:**

**Overcoming barriers to sustainable  
workplace transformation with Nina Laitala**

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**Wednesday 19 November, 1pm via Zoom**

# Research

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/data-statistics/data-explorer>

<https://www.plan.org.au/publications/gender-compass/>

<https://apo.org.au/node/325325#:~:text=As%20at%2030%20June%202023,Government%20boards%20in%202022%2D2023>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/juliekratz/2024/02/21/what-is-affinity-bias-and-why-does-it-matter/>

<https://vpssc.vic.gov.au/data-and-research/data-facts-visuals-state-of-the-sector/board-numbers-and-demographics/>

<https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/the-crucial-intersection-of-the-gender-pay-gap-and-positive-duty-in-creating-workplace-equality-for-women/>

[https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf)

<https://www.talentlyft.com/en/blog/article/244/top-10-benefits-of-diversity-in-the-workplace>

<https://aicd.companydirectors.com.au/advocacy/board-diversity/statistics>

<https://communitydirectors.com.au/research/icda-not-for-profit-governance-roadmap>

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/regional-population-age-and-sex/2022>

<https://fortune.com/2021/07/14/companies-with-more-women-at-the-top-fared-better-during-the-pandemic/>

<https://www.boardready.io/report-july-2021>

<https://www.purposebureau.com/insights>

[https://cew.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/FINAL\\_Advancing-Women-in-Australia\\_ALL-PAGES-002.pdf](https://cew.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/FINAL_Advancing-Women-in-Australia_ALL-PAGES-002.pdf)

<https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/women-leadership-2021#>

<https://stepup.ucsf.edu/sites/stepup.ucsf.edu/files/PULSEInventoryofLeadershipStyles.pdf>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/friendtors-how-many-us-have-them-chasity-champ-jones/>

# Help sheets and articles from ICDA



- <https://communitydirectors.com.au/help-sheets/finding-a-community-board-thats-right-for-you>
- <https://communitydirectors.com.au/help-sheets/why-boards-need-more-women>
- <https://communitydirectors.com.au/help-sheets/networking-and-mentoring-how-it-can-help-you-in-your-board-role>
- <https://communitydirectors.com.au/help-sheets/how-the-victorian-womens-register-works-and-why-you-should-be-on-it>
- <https://communitydirectors.com.au/articles/where-are-the-women>
- <https://communitydirectors.com.au/check-lists/questions-to-ask-yourself-before>

## Other readings and resources

- <https://www.wgea.gov.au/women-in-leadership>
- <https://www.wla.edu.au/what-is-the-gender-pay-gap.html>
- <https://ideas.ted.com/why-do-so-many-incompetent-men-become-leaders-and-what-can-we-do-about-it/>

# Other organisations promoting gender equality



<https://www.womenonboards.net/en-au/resources/boardroom-diversity-index>



<https://www.wla.edu.au/>



<https://www.agec.org.au/>



<https://www.governanceinstitute.com.au/news-media/news/2021/aug/board-diversity-index-2021-released/>



<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/2025JK-webinar>