



13 Professional development, networking and mentoring

Development opportunities and stretch assignments a proven pathway for women with career aspirations

When it comes to cultivating their talents, skills and networks, women tend to lag behind men for a variety of reasons. It's critical to help talented women overcome biases and social conditioning and embrace opportunities to grow and develop as professionals.

Global research points to a playing field that's far from level for men and women who seek to advance their careers. While it's crucial to hire more women to achieve a gender-balanced workforce, it's equally important to ensure women can access the education and training programs, mentoring and key networks that pave the way into positions of leadership and influence.

The professional development offered by organisations takes many forms, including cohort-based learning programs, on-the-job training in technical and interpersonal skills, and individual study.

Mentoring programs are structured learning relationships that provide employees with guidance from other employees or senior leaders with specific skills and knowledge.

Networks provide women with valuable communities and avenues to develop skills in connecting and building relationships, garnering advice from peers and experts and sharing knowledge and experience.

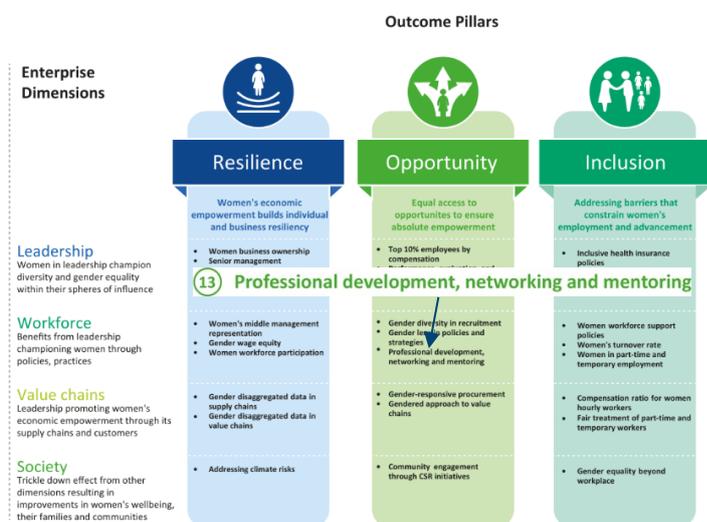
Sweef Capital Vice President, Ms Rowena Reyes, says leaders should ensure that training and development opportunities are shared equally across their organisation.

“Gender gaps persist globally in women’s access to skills development, and this shapes their participation in the labour market and their ability to advance into senior leadership positions.”

- Rowena Reyes, Sweef Capital

“This isn’t as straightforward as it seems,” Ms Reyes says. “Gender gaps persist globally in women’s access to skills development, and this shapes their participation in the labour market and their ability to advance into senior leadership positions.”

The challenges women face include gender biases in occupational choices, barriers to training and development opportunities, an absence of effective training programs, inflexibility of work schedules, and a lack of programs to balance work-life demands.



Sweef Capital Gender ROI™ indicators



The Sweef Capital Gender ROI™ identifies gender equality and diversity gaps and informs interventions to build resilience, equal opportunity and inclusion. This Insight Series explores how each indicator contributes to delivering social, financial and economic returns: <https://sweefcapital.com/gender-roitm/>

Occupational segregation remains a dominant feature of training and labour markets, limiting women's choices and confining them to lower-paid and lower-status jobs that mostly lack skills development programs. Women are also often less aware than men of training opportunities.

Ms Reyes says there's still heavy masculine stereotyping around senior leadership roles and expectations.

"Alongside this, beliefs that women are less committed to their work or need to be protected from overwork limit women's exposure to the career development opportunities necessary to advance to senior leadership roles," she says. "Many women juggle family responsibilities that deter them from participating in male-dominated networks. There simply aren't enough women in senior leadership positions to provide visible role models and mentor talented women."

For international leadership coach and Sweef Capital Advisor, Ms Sylvie Matz, supporting women to access professional development opportunities and stretch assignments makes good business sense. It's a path she strongly encourages through her advisory and coaching work with organisations and the private equity industry (see breakout).

A seasoned investor with strong executive experience, Ms Matz spent part of her early career with corporate giant General Electric (GE), including reporting directly to legendary CEO Jack Welch. During that time, she recalls, women were routinely challenged to take on big assignments, such as significant profit-and-loss responsibilities.

"The numbers (now) are very much about a scarcity not of gender equality but of women in powered roles, roles where you can make big decisions and have a big impact. As an investor, that would mean being in the investment committee or even at board level."

- Sylvie Matz, investor, strategic advisor and leadership coach

"As many women as men have entered the workforce in Europe over the past quarter of a century," Ms Matz notes. "What you see with the numbers (now) is very much about a scarcity not of gender equality but of women in powered roles, roles where you can make big decisions and have a big impact. As an investor, that would mean being in the investment committee or even at board level."

Gender performance across Europe varies markedly between geographies, cultures and sectors. In the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap Report, for example, the top ranks are dominated by Nordic countries with France, Ms Matz's home base, ranked fortieth. Business continues to trail the public sector in numbers of women holding roles of power and influence. Laggard performances are likely to shift over time, though, thanks to a recent European Union directive to promote gender equity and gender equality on corporate boards.

Like Ms Matz, Ms Reyes believes ensuring equal access to learning opportunities is fundamental to good leadership and organisational stewardship.

"People want to work for companies that invest in their continuous growth and development, and this becomes a driving force behind an organisation's ability to retain top talent," she says. "Training should be a core part of employees' performance discussions and enterprises should offer flexibility in time and location of training to accommodate those with family responsibilities."

Ms Matz is upbeat about the potential for progress on gender. "I'm seeing some sparks of hope, more than hope – real engagement for action," she says. "Leadership programs, mentoring and networking are super-important. Yes, it's important to focus on the numbers, the disequilibrium, but that's just the start. We also need to put forward success stories so the (societal) norms change too."#



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Private equity – Highlighting the case for culture change

Like many industries, private equity is undergoing a sea change as factors like increased competition and higher interest rates expand focus from traditional financial and operational metrics to include an underutilised asset: talent.

For industry veteran, Ms Sylvie Matz, a Senior Advisor with Falco Global Partners, private equity is ripe for transformation, and that includes embracing gender equality as a competitive advantage.

“If you look at the numbers in venture capital, only two per cent of capital goes to women-run businesses,” says Ms Matz, . “Outrageous – whatever term you want to use. What’s important is to acknowledge that and talk about what works.”



Regularly invited to executive education programs to share her experience and expertise, Ms Matz coaches and consults to organisations including corporates and portfolio companies. Leadership capability, and retention, is increasingly on the radar. She says leadership programs, mentoring and networking are indispensable tools that help women build their performance and careers.

“Lots of companies like to have women-only programs, which can be safe reflection spaces but that’s not enough,” she says. “We need mentoring by women and men so that we can work on what’s in between. We need to make sure people understand that gender equality is like a battle you fight one relationship at a time.”

Ms Matz says it’s important to share success stories such as HI INOV, the investor company started by a man and woman that’s regularly and successfully able to raise funds. “HI INOV has engineered gender equality at each level, from announcement to governance bodies – you have fifty-fifty equality between men and women,” she says.

In a notoriously tough industry, it’s critical to help women access opportunities to advance their careers, especially into key decision-making roles. According to Ms Matz, in private equity in France, while the gender split is roughly equal at entry level, only about one in five women are involved in investment decisions, even fewer in partnerships.

“Every time you train or coach or mentor a woman, and you mentor men and women, there’s another energy,” Ms Matz says. “Relationships are critical – your web of interactions is where you can make a difference. It’s hard work when you have companies that are demanding, but if you have people who cope with that and have the energy to change, it’s infectious. It has a multiplier effect.”#

For more information about HI INNOV, visit <https://www.hiinov.com/team>



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