



Women's Workplace

Visibility in 2026

Australian women are more ambitious than ever, but gaps in clarity, visibility and employer support continue to slow career progress.

women's
AGENDA

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We acknowledge and pay respect to the past, present and future Traditional Custodians and Elders of this nation and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

About Women's Agenda

Women's Agenda is an independent daily news publication 100% owned and run by women. Our team of journalists and researchers provide a vital perspective across daily news events and current affairs, including across politics, media, business, tech, climate, health and leadership. Published by Agenda Media Pty Ltd, founded by Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert, this team also publishes Women's Health News and runs a growing podcast network, events, roundtables and regular research reports.

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Introduction

This report, produced in partnership with [Cultivate Sponsorship](#), draws on 372 responses in a national survey conducted in April and May 2026 from women across career stages in Australia.

It provides a snapshot of their experiences navigating the workplace, their goals and ambitions and approaches to career planning. The findings offer one of the sharpest pictures yet of what women hope to achieve in their careers, the key structural barriers holding women back in the workplace, as well as what organisations can do to better support them.

Australian women are not being held back by a lack of ambition, skills or capability. More than half of women surveyed want a promotion in the next three years, and the biggest barriers to getting there are structural.

The data shows women's progress is being slowed by gaps in career clarity, visibility in the workplace, and employer support.

This report also drills down on the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and First Nations women, with the data revealing a broad workplace culture that struggles to see, support and sponsor these women into leadership.

For example, the majority (60 percent) of the CALD women surveyed say they talk openly about their career goals with friends outside of work. But only 26 per cent raise those ambitions with their immediate manager, and just 19 per cent with peers and colleagues. This points to a widespread workplace culture where CALD women may feel less safe speaking up about their ambitions at work.

A portrait of Katriina Tähkä, a woman with short dark hair, smiling. She is wearing a black and white patterned blazer over a black top and a silver necklace. She is standing against a grey wall.

Katriina Tähkä,
*Managing Director of
Cultivate Sponsorship*

Just over half of the women who responded to the survey are more than 15 years into their careers, and around three in 10 are currently in a management position. Many of these women reported that ageism is operating as a brake on their advancement.

Managing Director of Cultivate Sponsorship, **Katriina Tähkä**, says the data separates ambition from access, with invisibility and career clarity noted as the key barriers for women in workplaces across the country.

“We've spent years hearing that women, and particularly culturally diverse and First Nations women, ‘self-select out’ of leadership. This survey shows the opposite,” Tähkä explains. “Fifty-five per cent of respondents want a promotion in the next three years, and the sample is senior, with half more than 15 years into their careers. The barriers they name aren't about skill. They're about clarity and visibility. Only 12 per cent point to a lack of skills or experience.”

This reframe matters on women's ambition because it moves the conversation from "how do we fix women?" to "how do we fix what organisations make visible?"

“For culturally diverse women specifically, the survey adds real texture to the discrimination and competition they navigate on top of that visibility gap,” Tähkä said. “This isn't a story about confidence. It's a story about structure and the workplace culture that people need to navigate; and eventually choose to stay in or not.”

This report sets out the key findings from the full sample, the voices behind the data, and a focused slice on the 25% respondents who identified as being from a culturally or linguistically diverse background, including those who shared the unique strengths they bring to their work. We close with some final thoughts and suggestions for how employers can better support women to advance in their careers.

Key stats to know:

55%

Australian women are ambitious, with 55% hoping to get a promotion in the next three years

60%

60% of women have a career plan in place. Plans tend to be short or medium-horizon with only 8% are thinking five-to-ten years out

43%

43% of women say a lack of clear options is getting in the way of their next promotion

50%

Women are most likely to voice their ambitions to their immediate manager (55%) or family (50%)

25%

Just 25% of women said they had clarity over the options that are next for their career

43%

43% said their current or most recent employer pulled back on initiatives supporting women in the workplace in the past year

37%

37% of women say a lack of invisibility in the workplace is the key barrier to promotion

75%

75% say their current or most recent employer can improve its efforts to achieve gender equality in leadership roles



For culturally

and linguistically diverse women:

55%

of culturally and linguistically diverse respondents hope to be promoted within three years

43%

of culturally and linguistically diverse respondents say they have clarity over the options ahead for their career

41%

have a two-to-five-year plan and 15% have a five-to-ten-year plan

26%

Only 26% voice their career ambitions to their immediate manager

60%

voice their ambitions to friends outside of work and their industry

31%

say their employer has pulled back on initiatives supporting women in the past year

24%

Just under a quarter (24%) said their current or most recent employer offers adequate opportunities for mentorship or sponsorship for women

Key findings breakdown from the main sample

Ambition is not the problem.

55% of respondents hope to be promoted within three years. Combined with a sample weighted toward women already 15+ years into their careers, and around a third already in management, this is unambiguous evidence of sustained ambition at senior levels.

The barriers are structural, not skills-based.

The most-cited barrier to promotion is a lack of clear options available, at 43%, followed by a lack of visibility in the workplace at 37%. Competition for the role, caring responsibilities, discrimination, and a lack of flexible work options all rate as meaningful barriers. Insufficient skills or experience was cited by just 12% of respondents. The barrier is not capability — it is what the organisation makes possible, and who it sees.

Career planning is informal and clarity is lacking.

The single largest group — around 40% — do not have a career plan at all. Among those who do, plans tend to be short or medium-horizon (12 months or two-to-five years). Only 8% are thinking five-to-ten years out. Reinforcing this, only 25% of respondents say they have clarity over what's next for their careers; 45% say they don't, and 30% are unsure.

Ambitions stop at the line manager.

When asked who they voice their career ambitions to, respondents most often cite their immediate manager (around 55%) and their family (around 50%). Voicing ambitions to other managers, to senior leaders inside the organisation, or to leaders in the wider industry occurs far less often. The senior decision-makers who most influence advancement are largely not hearing what women want.

Employers are falling short and women know it.

Three results sit together as the sharpest signal in the survey. 63% of respondents do not believe their current or most recent employer offers adequate opportunities for mentorship or sponsorship for women. 43% believe their employer has pulled back on initiatives supporting women in the workplace over the past year. And 75% believe their employer can do more to achieve gender equality in leadership roles — the most one-sided result in the survey.

Age is the standout perception factor.

When asked which factors are affecting how others perceive their abilities at work, age was named more often than caring commitments, part-time status, flexible working status, health, or career breaks. For a sample dominated by women 15+ years into their careers and in management positions, this is striking. It suggests ageism is operating as a brake on advancement for senior women in particular.



Women's voices behind the data

Hundreds of women shared what holds them back from voicing their career ambitions. Here's what they had to say.

"Apart from being invisible, if you have been in the same role for five years you are overlooked. You are not given the opportunities to act and people think that you are not ambitious."

"...You keep your ambitions to yourself because you don't know who you can trust."

"Common sense. Don't tip your hand if you don't want others getting in your way."

"Yes, potentially these ambitions don't align with what's on offer at my current company, so it could be seen as 'already out the door'."

"More senior managers don't ask/seem interested, even my manager, although they provide positive feedback isn't that supportive because it will mean I leave her team."

"Nothing holds me back from voicing my (and other Queenager women's) deservedness to pursue career goals post 60; ageism bias, ageist practices and inflexible role structures are what stops traction (and why most of us end up self-employed)."

"I have the issue where I'm great at my current role so they don't want me to progress because they are used to me doing their role too."

A culturally diverse lens on data

25% of respondents identified as being from a culturally and/or linguistically diverse (CALD) background. Filtering the survey results to this subset produces a notably different picture of CALD women's experiences in the workplace.

A note on sample size: It's small so percentage differences should be read as directional signals rather than statistically robust gaps.

Where the figures align.

Promotion ambition is essentially identical: 55% of culturally diverse respondents are looking to be promoted in the next three years, the same as the main sample. Lack of clear options remains the most-cited barrier to promotion (40%, against 43% in the main sample), and lack of visibility sits at 33% (against 37%).

Where the figures diverge and what this tell us

Culturally diverse respondents are planning further ahead. 61% have some form of career plan — broadly comparable to the main sample — but the composition is different. 41% have a two-to-five-year plan (versus 28% in the main sample) and 15% have a five-to-ten-year plan (versus 8% in the main sample).

And they have substantially more clarity on what's next. 43% of culturally diverse respondents say they have clarity over the options ahead for their career, almost double the 25% in the main sample. This is one of the largest divergences in the survey, and it overturns the assumption that the clarity gap is uniform across the cohort.

But the conversation is happening outside work. Only 26% voice their career ambitions to

their immediate manager, compared with around 55% in the main sample. Only 19% voice them to peers and colleagues at work. By contrast, 60% voice their ambitions to friends outside of work and their industry — the highest-rated audience for this group. Culturally diverse respondents are keeping career conversations out of the workplace and relying on external networks to do the planning and processing.

Their view of employer support is slightly more positive, or at least less critical. 24% say their employer offers adequate mentorship or sponsorship for women, compared with around 15% in the main sample. And 31% say their employer has pulled back on initiatives supporting women in the past year, compared with 43% in the main sample.

These gaps consistently sit in the same direction: culturally diverse respondents are reporting a slightly less acute experience of employer retreat.

Taken together, the picture is of a cohort doing more of their own career architecture — clearer plans, longer horizons, external advisory networks — while voicing ambitions outside the workplace rather than inside it. These results could indicate CALD women are more likely to build coping strategies as a response to their lack of trust in internal pathways.





Voices of culturally and linguistically diverse women

On what holds them back from voicing their ambition:

"Trust, lack of support and options in my immediate area."

"Mental health, caring and parental responsibilities, imposter syndrome, utter exhaustion and questioning if I'm right for the role."

"I can't mention it openly at work due to the toxic environment."

"Competitiveness and scarcity of options for women in leadership positions."

"People don't understand me as an Indigenous woman. I.e my worldviews, concept of leadership from an Indigenous lens plus stereotypes of Indigenous peoples."

"Modesty, not wanting to sound 'up myself', superstition — if I utter ambitions publicly, they won't happen."

Unique strengths, in their own words

Culturally and linguistically diverse women bring a variety of strengths to their work that have been shaped by their cultural background. Whether it's fluency in multiple languages, enhanced empathy or a strong work ethic, CALD women told us that many of their unique skills and strengths have been invaluable assets in building their careers.

Here's a snapshot of what CALD women told us about their strengths.

"Introversion, quiet and calm strength, patience are shaped by my cultural background. Value resilience and resourcefulness."

"Stories of lived experience: the ability to break the ice by mentioning how things can appear differently through a different lens."

"I bring 'village energy' and multitasking skills honed by wrangling kids."

"Work ethic, not complaining and getting on with things, being always open for a challenge, understanding people from diverse backgrounds."

"Having experienced a major economic crisis in Europe has made me hardworking, resilient, given me a multicultural and open mindset and gave me the courage to live abroad and pursue various professional qualifications. It is a pity this is seen as 'your CV looks great and your experience but you lack local Australian experience'."

"Growing up bilingual taught me how to pivot between one language and the other, grew resilience from being bullied due to my background, higher EQ."

"An openness to everything! As someone of a mixed cultural background, I want to see that everyone has the possibility to be seen and embraced."



Voices of Indigenous women

Women's Agenda received a number of responses from those identifying as being from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.

The sample size was too small to yield meaningful survey comparison results. However, the comments were telling, especially around some of the unique strengths, insights or approaches this cohort of respondents say is shaped by their cultural background, that they bring to their work.

First Nations women shared comments about how their lived experience and understanding of cultural safety is an additional skill set they bring to their work. They also mentioned this can be complex and is often under-acknowledged by their employers.

“ I am always the first to step in and provide support when it's required. Often being commended for my ability to strategically analyse and get in and get the job done, while also supporting and motivating others. ”

“ Many. It's a huge part of my acknowledged and hidden work. Community obligations and expectations must be balanced with real, imagined and expected extra service my employer holds of me and my role that are extra to my non- Aboriginal peers. ”

“ A view that isn't driven from privilege unlike most people in my industry. When most of the customers do not come from privilege themselves. ”

“ I bring a unique lived experience from the world's oldest living civilisation, most of which is currently not recognised by our Western/dominant systems. “I understand what it's like to code-switch and have an exceptionally high level of Relational Intelligence as a result of cultural and emotional intelligence skill sets required to navigate systems. ”

“ Understanding of cultural safety and capability, strong capability about building and leading a change agenda towards a more improved inclusive workplace, understanding of intersectionality, strong community networks. ”



‘Voices from those who identified as having a disability’

“ I’m always scanning for “danger” which makes me good at assessing things quickly as well as understanding impacts from decisions. ”

“ I am an older, disabled and queer woman. I have learned through experience how to kick career goals twice as high and twice as hard as my male colleagues to be able to gain the same career progression. ”

“ A view that isn’t driven from privilege unlike most people in my industry. When most of the customers do not come from privilege themselves. ”

“ I am always the first to step in and provide support when it’s required. Often being commended for my ability to strategically analyse and get in and get the job done, while also supporting and motivating others. When I go to work, I give my absolute all into everything I do so I know that I have given my best effort in making meaningful change and improving outcomes. ”

“ Lived experience, ability to work with many diverse groups & can work in teams and on individual projects. I have advanced listening skills and have mentored many over my career/s. ”

A note from Cultivate Sponsorship's Katriina Tähkä

"What is most concerning to me about women's experiences in the workplace was the pervasive sense that voicing ambition is pointless. Several women who responded to the survey say that they have given up.

Comments like 'more senior managers don't ask or seem that interested, even my manager (although they provide positive feedback) isn't that supportive because it means I will leave her team'.



Leaders are not creating time and space to talk to these women about their careers. Does another avenue exist? No, 63 per cent of women say their employer doesn't offer adequate mentorship or sponsorship, so the conversations they are having about their careers stop at their family. Senior leaders inside the business, and leaders in the wider industry, barely feature.

That tells me the people with the power to open doors simply aren't hearing what these women want or if they do they seem to lack interest or knowledge on what to do next.

The ambition of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse women is never reaching the room where decisions get made. People are still progressing – just not them. Informal sponsorship is benefitting the same old usual people.

For culturally diverse women, who told us discrimination and competition for roles are more prominent barriers again, that silence carries more weight. If the people who could sponsor you never hear your ambition, sponsorship can't happen by accident. It has to be built."

How organisations can actively support actively support the ambitions of women in the workplace

Encourage open conversations around ambition

Talking about ambition in the workplace is not always easy. For women who feel invisible or unsure about their next career steps, it can be difficult to navigate. Employers have a key role to play in ensuring women feel comfortable and safe in their workplace to talk about their ambition.

Our survey shows this is not always the case, with many women, especially those from CALD backgrounds, looking outside of their organisation to family and friends for career advice. It means that senior managers and leaders are not hearing about the goals and ambitions of women.

So what can be done? First up, encouraging open and culturally-safe conversations about

work and ambition inside workplaces is essential. It's something that senior leaders in organisations should be thinking about and actively working towards solutions. While 55% of women say they would talk to their immediate manager about their ambitions, this conversation is stopping there with many senior leaders not creating the space to talk to women about their ambitions.

This means a once-yearly review with an immediate manager is not enough support for ambitious women who are looking for their next career step. Continuous, open conversations with all levels of management could support improvements in this area.

"Start by asking who in your organisation is actually hearing from these women, and who should be. If the answer is "just their line manager," you already have your first action item," Tähkä says.





Treat curated sponsorship programs as infrastructure

What's clear from this survey is that employers can do more to support and elevate women in their workplaces. The majority of women indicated they didn't believe their current or most recent employer was doing enough to offer adequate opportunities for mentorship and sponsorship for women.

When implemented correctly, sponsorship changes who gets seen, supported, and promoted in organisations by pairing high-potential women who may be overlooked in informal networks with influential senior leaders. Sponsors are given access to tailored support and training, while 'sponsees' are matched intentionally and guided by a senior leader with structure. Cultivate Sponsorship's [Willow program](#), or [Warra program](#) (which specifically supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees) can support organisations in this space.

According to Tähkä, organisations must look beyond a quick fix or a generic visibility campaign to build connections that will last. "For culturally diverse women, this survey shows discrimination, care load and competition for roles are felt more sharply, while the sense of invisibility runs just as deep as it does across the broader sample," she says.

"So the fix isn't a single, generic visibility campaign. It's structural: sponsors senior enough to advocate at the table, and relationships intentional enough to survive a restructure or a change in leadership.

One of the strongest results in the survey was women's belief that their employer could do much more to achieve gender equality in leadership roles. It comes as 43 per cent of women agreed their current (or most recent) employers had pulled back on supporting women in the workplace in the past year.

For First Nations women the picture is starker again. Minderoo's Indigenous Employment Index puts Indigenous representation in senior leadership at 0.7 per cent among reporting employers. Gari Yala's 2025-26 research found the share of organisations offering Indigenous leader or Elder sponsorship of new and young staff has actually dropped since 2020, despite the people who had access to it reporting that they had higher levels of job satisfaction and intention to stay.

"Pulling back now, at the exact moment this survey shows women are asking for more, is the wrong direction," Tähkä says. "Employers need to treat sponsorship as infrastructure, not as a program that gets deprioritised when budgets tighten."

The difference between mentorship and sponsorship

For organisations looking at the difference between mentorship and curated sponsorship programs, the key is that sponsorship creates durable, professional relationships. Structure is what makes sponsorship reliable instead of accidental.

Organisations can actually measure, report on, and improve on sponsorship programs, which is more than can be said for most "supporting women" initiatives.

"Mentoring gives you advice. Sponsorship gives you advocacy, and those are two different things. A mentor tells you what to do. A sponsor uses their own credibility to open a door you can't open yourself or make an introduction that makes new pathways possible," Tähkä says.

In Cultivate Sponsorship's alumni data, 73 per cent of 'sponsees' keep in contact with their original sponsor well after the formal program

ends, and 90 per cent rate that relationship as 'good' to 'excellent'. That's not a training outcome. That's a durable professional relationship doing real work inside the business, long after the workshop is over.

"For women who've felt overlooked or have experienced discrimination, the value isn't just visibility for its own sake. It's having someone senior enough to change how a room reads you, and structured enough that it doesn't depend on luck, timing, or whether your manager happens to be a good advocate," Tähkä says.

"The 'secret sauce' in the design of our methodology is that the real learner on a Cultivate sponsorship program is the senior leader. They get to see their organisation through someone else's eyes, hear about the invisible barriers and unspoken behaviours that usually force good people to quietly self-select out of the organisation and often the industry."



Conclusion

The message the 2026 Workplace Visibility Survey delivers is that Australian women are already ambitious in their careers. What they need are workplaces and employers that recognise this ambition, invest in it and make space for honest conversations and visibility around career planning.

Career progression does not happen through individual ambition alone. It is shaped by who is seen, who gets access to advocacy, sponsorship and leadership opportunities, as well as access to senior leaders and the people making decisions about advancement. Our survey indicates that many Australian women, especially those from culturally diverse or First Nations backgrounds, are navigating this situation without the right support or visibility.

We challenge employers to sit with these findings, and think about what visibility really means inside their workplace. For many women, particularly those who are more than 15 years into their career, being highly capable in their current role can become a barrier to moving beyond it. Age was the most frequently cited factor affecting perceptions of ability.

The culturally diverse findings add another important dimension to the data. These respondents report greater career clarity and longer-term planning, but are much more likely to discuss their ambitions with people outside their workplace than with managers or colleagues. This suggests that women are often building their own career architecture and relying on external networks, perhaps because internal pathways do not feel trustworthy or accessible.

The women who responded to the survey described feeling invisible, overlooked, unsure who to trust and whether to disclose their ambitions with those inside their organisation.

Employers need to make career pathways clearer, create meaningful sponsorship opportunities, ensure women have access to senior decision-makers, and examine the ways age, caring responsibilities, cultural background and lived experience shape perceptions of leadership potential.

Use of AI in the production process

AI tools were used in parts of the production process to support research, drafting, editing and/or refinement of content. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed and edited by the Women's Agenda and Cultivate Sponsorship team to ensure accuracy, relevance, consistency with our editorial standards and alignment with the intended audience and purpose of the report.



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