

PEOPLE  
MEASURES



Men Actioning Inclusive Leadership

# GENDER EQUITY: MALE LEADERS MATTER

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Transforming organisational culture and  
breaking down barriers to gender equity

By Frances Feenstra & Elena Carter

# Why male leaders are crucial in advancing workplace gender equity

**A quarter of the way into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the gender gap in leadership remains in place for many organisations, representing continued disadvantage for women and a significant missed opportunity for business.** As it has for decades<sup>1</sup>, recent research once again shows that gender equity and better company performance go hand-in-hand, and that ‘gender-balanced executive teams deliver higher company value’<sup>2</sup>. However, despite continued evidence and the fact that gender equity has sat on management and Board agendas for years, the numbers of women in senior roles remain stubbornly, and disappointingly, low<sup>3</sup>.

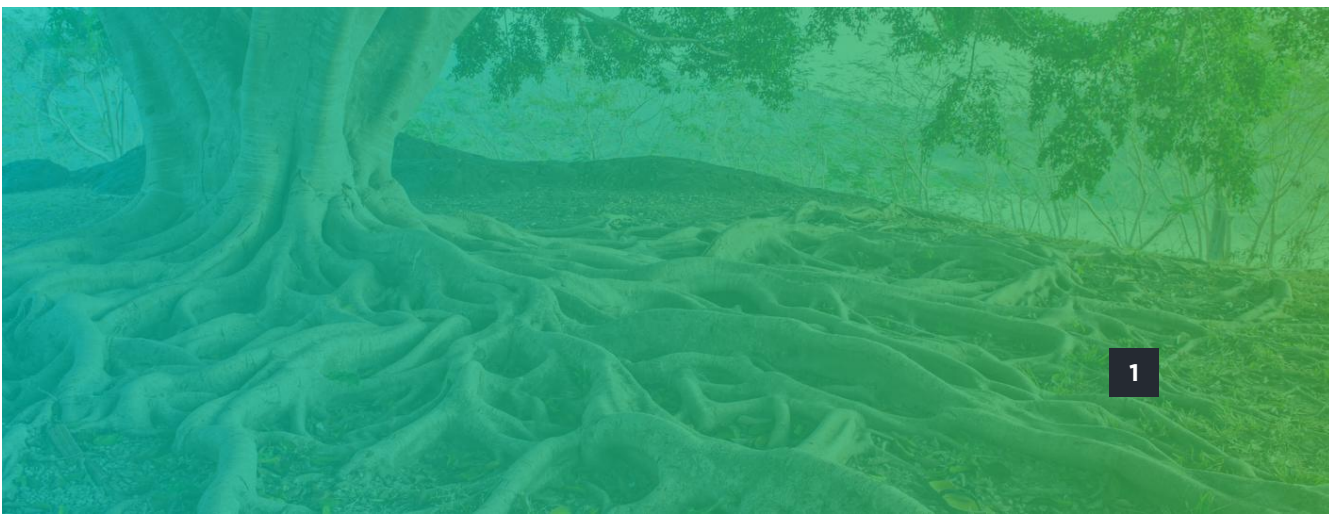
The reasons aren’t new. Systems are slow to change, especially when power has been, and continues to be, concentrated in one group. In most organisations that group is largely made up of (white) men<sup>4</sup>.

## From fixing women and fixing systems, to engaging everyone in the work

To address gender inequality, organisations have historically focused on developing women through training, mentoring and sponsorship. These initiatives helped many individuals but left intact the broader systemic and cultural context that continues to disadvantage women relative to their male counterparts<sup>5</sup>.

In recent years, the focus for organisations has shifted to also address systemic barriers through changes to policy and process reform, quotas, targets, bias-resistant recruitment, pay transparency, and improved parental leave and flexibility. These interventions are essential and can shift outcomes at scale but still do not address the day-to-day behaviours and attitudes of the men who hold most decision-making power.

A truly effective approach requires **combining** systemic change with deliberate individual work by leaders of all genders to share responsibility for equity and reshape the cultural norms that influence organisational life. To date, the majority of this work has been done by women, however without men progress is stalling.



“Gender inequity persists in organizations because it depends just as much on men’s leadership as on women’s.”

- Nicole Ferry,  
Assistant Professor, Copenhagen Business School

## Influence matters in gender equity

Leaders play a significant role in shaping workplace culture. Their actions and decisions set the tone for the entire organisation and its operations. Time and again, research has demonstrated the critical role of leadership in organisational change<sup>6</sup>. By extension, the way men exercise power and influence matters for workplace gender equity. Whether they are aware of it or not, how male leaders use their authority in relation to gender inclusivity directly shapes the organisational culture that emerges. When male leaders recognise the influence they hold and use it with intention, they can help remove barriers that disadvantage women.

Although policies that explicitly exclude women constitute unlawful discrimination, many seemingly 'neutral' policies and processes still generate unequal outcomes. While in some cases these outcomes amount to indirect discrimination (which is also illegal in Australia), far too often everyday practices that are exclusionary fly under the radar as 'just the way things are done'. These practices show up in how work is allocated, whose availability is assumed, who is expected to take notes or organise events, who is interrupted, how informal networks form, or whose ideas or contributions are recognised (just to name a few).

Policy changes alone cannot shift these cultural norms. How leaders behave in the everyday, through small choices like who speaks first in a meeting, who receives developmental feedback (and when and how it is framed), who receives credit, and what is left unsaid, can influence whether inclusion feels real or performative.



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## Culture is built in the everyday

Culture changes when people see their leaders behave differently. When male leaders share credit, make transparent decisions, participate in parental leave and caring responsibilities outside of work, or call out bias and discrimination when they see it, they set the cultural standard for others to follow. Consistency then turns those signals into visible results. Teams collaborate more openly and make better decisions, and the benefits show up in retention and trust as much as performance.



The everyday experience of belonging, having a voice, and being treated with respect is what keeps people engaged - especially for those who are navigating multiple forms of bias. This is why leadership for gender equity is so much more than a communications exercise. It's a daily practice in which values are expressed through action and felt by individuals.

## Staying with the discomfort

Change in this space can be (and often is) uncomfortable. And that's the point. Real, adaptive, leadership means staying curious when the easy answers run out<sup>7</sup>. It means seeking out and listening to the voices of all women. Especially women of colour, First Nations women, lesbian women, queer women, trans women, disabled women, and other women whose experiences are often missing from decision-making. It means listening and being open if you are made aware that the ways of working you hold dear and believed were working well ... actually are not. And doing the same when the conversation is about you, and how you might need to show up differently.

Leaders who can reflect on and sit with this discomfort, even when they may not yet know what the discomfort is about, are leaders who are willing to admit they don't have all the answers. That humility is what credibility looks like in modern leadership.

And leaders who treat this as an ongoing and real practice, rather than compliance, help normalise growth over defensiveness. They make reflection and course-correction visible, carving a path for others to follow.

## Understanding intersecting inequalities

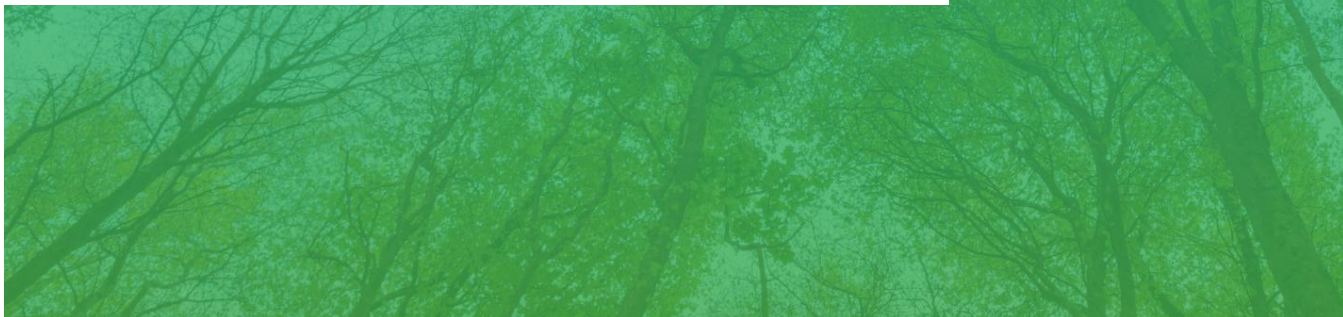
Every workplace contains individuals whose experiences of inequity overlap across gender, race, age, disability, and class<sup>8</sup>. Addressing gender equity without regard to intersectionality makes progress shallow<sup>9</sup>. Men who understand intersectionality will see patterns others miss; how bias compounds, how opportunity narrows, how policies and practices that look neutral can still exclude and disadvantage.

Those insights lead to better decisions: more inclusive recruitment, fairer promotion criteria, stronger psychological safety. **The more leaders see how these patterns overlap, the more impactful their progress will be.**



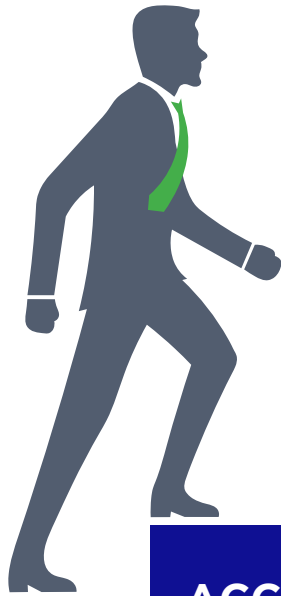
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## It's leadership, not advocacy alone, that makes the difference

Leadership for gender equity is not about speaking on someone else's behalf or stepping in only when it is convenient or publicly rewarding. It is a deliberate and sustained practice. The role of male leaders in gender equity mirrors the role of [co-conspirators in racial equity](#) because these forms of inequity are deeply connected.



### Co-conspirator, not what you might think

In equity work, accomplice and co-conspirator are not legal labels. They describe people who work alongside others to change unfair systems.

### ALLY

An ally supports equity in principle and expresses that support through listening, learning, and speaking up in lower risk situations, but has not yet consistently taken action to challenge or dismantle unjust systems.

### ACCOMPLICE

An accomplice moves from understanding to action. They use their influence to confront bias, disrupt exclusionary practices, and make choices that shift everyday patterns. They recognise their responsibility and are willing to step in even when it requires effort or discomfort.

### CO-CONSPIRATOR

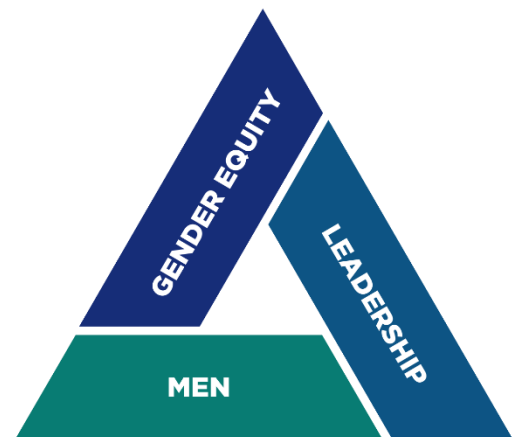
A co-conspirator works directly alongside those most affected by inequity. They form trusting relationships, take shared risks, and stay accountable for change. Their commitment is grounded in action that aims to transform the systems and structures that create harm, not just individual behaviours.

True inclusive leadership draws from all three of the definitions above but **requires more than allyship alone**<sup>10</sup>. It starts with learning and listening, requires active and visible behaviour, and grows into shared effort to change systems. For male leaders, this means using their influence to redistribute voice, open opportunities, and model behaviours of inclusion that make equity an everyday practice (even when it's challenging), ultimately shifting exclusionary cultural norms.

## Men as actively inclusive leaders

When men act deliberately, intentionally and with courage, change becomes possible. Programs such as [MAIL \(Men Actioning Inclusive Leadership\)](#) are helping turn desire for change into practice. Developed by People Measures, MAIL brings together evidence-based learning and peer accountability, giving male leaders space to explore influence, bias, and responsibility in a practical way.

In a recent peer reviewed journal article published in the Academy of Management Learning & Education, Copenhagen Business School Assistant Professor and researcher Nicole Ferry highlights the People Measures MAIL program as one of the few initiatives globally that “hit the trifecta of targeting men, leadership, and gender equity issues”<sup>11</sup>. Rather than a program delivered *to* male leaders, MAIL is designed to work *with* male leaders and support them as they practice leadership in gender inclusive ways.



An independent evaluation of the 2025 MAIL program conducted by [The 100% Project](#) found that MAIL increased men’s individual insight into gender, power and privilege, and women’s experiences. More importantly, they were also committed to act and had greater confidence in their capability to do so, with many describing the gender inclusive behaviour changes they engaged in after the program.

“Leadership can sometimes be risky and uncomfortable. The MAIL program has given me valuable tools and strategies to be a more effective and inclusive leader.”

- 2025 MAIL Participant

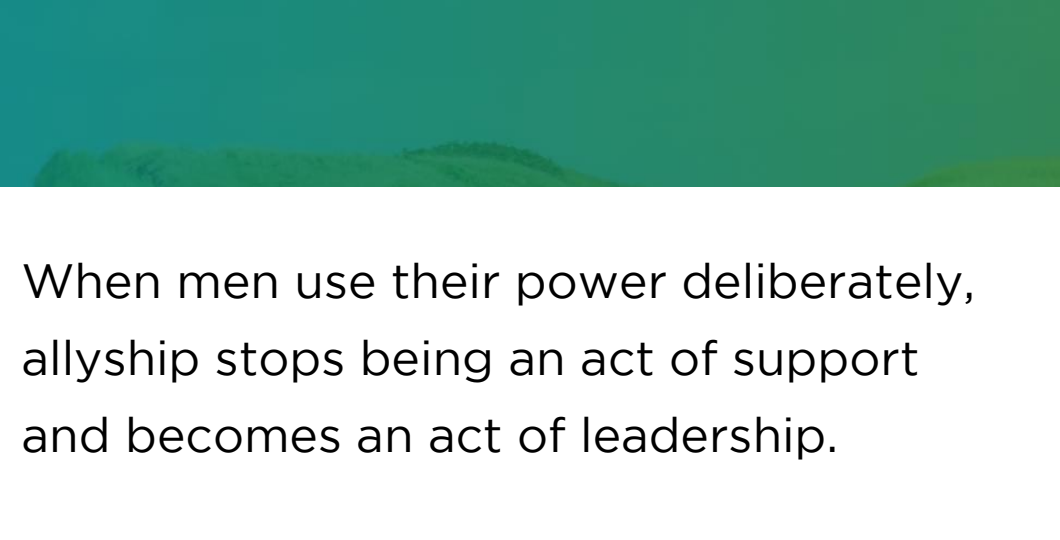
When men understand what the path forward looks like, and the leadership required of them, they progress real change rather than engaging in [performative allyship](#).

## Moving beyond 'why' to 'how'

The business case for equity and inclusion has been researched extensively and the evidence is clear. When paired with inclusion, diversity makes organisations fairer, more stable, and better at adapting to change while delivering higher company value<sup>2</sup>. What's missing isn't more evidence on the benefits of gender equity, it is knowing what the path forward looks like for real gender inclusive leadership. And having the motivation and commitment to take that path.

Men continue to hold the majority of key decision-making roles and therefore have their hands on the levers of organisational power. With that power comes the opportunity to redefine what a truly inclusive organisational culture looks like. When men use their power deliberately, allyship stops being an act of support and becomes an act of leadership, either as an accomplice, or ideally a co-conspirator.

Real progress comes from consistency; the quiet, visible actions and decisions that tell others what kind of culture they belong to. That's where genuine inclusion and belonging take hold.



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## Continuing the conversation

If you're working through a workplace gender equity challenge or looking to strengthen how your male leaders engage with equity, get in touch, we'd love to have a conversation: [peoplemeasures.com.au/contact-us](https://peoplemeasures.com.au/contact-us)

### About the authors



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Frances is a registered organisational psychologist with more than 25 years' experience and core expertise in leadership development and facilitation, talent management and assessment, and executive coaching.

Passionate about leadership development and focused on helping all individuals be the best they can be, Frances is well known for her focus on diversity and inclusion. She has an especially deep understanding of the challenges and stressors encountered by women in the workplace and was the driver and principal designer of People Measures' highly regarded Women in Leadership Development (WILD) program, and Men Actioning Inclusive Leadership (MAIL), a program designed for men who want to be true allies for women in organisations.

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#### Elena Carter

Elena is a registered psychologist with a Master's in Organisational Psychology. Elena is passionate about diversity and inclusion and how leadership behaviours and organisational systems can create more equitable workplaces. Her Masters thesis explored interventions to reduce sexism and increase gender-inclusive workplace behaviours. Elena also contributes to advancing gender equity in leadership as a volunteer Research Committee member for The 100% Project.

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