

What Women Want 2026

An actionable report revealing what women and marginalised groups want and need to **thrive** in the workplace.



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Introduction



An introduction from the Co-founders of WORK180

2025 was a particularly turbulent time for those responsible for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across their organisations.

Externally, expectations for evidence and transparency around employers' DEI actions, progress, and outcomes continued to rise. As the Australian Government strengthened requirements around gender pay gap publication, we also saw a record number of women turning to **our transparent career platform** to review, compare, and verify employers' commitment and progress in this space.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, many of you were navigating the ripple effects of politically fuelled pushback on DEI in the US. Set against a backdrop of global conflict and economic uncertainty, this brought louder scrutiny, greater caution, and mounting pressure to justify, rename, or quietly scale back equity work. And yet, the work didn't stop. Only a handful retreated entirely, and, based on our experience supporting employers in this area, most actually intensified their efforts.

We're pleased to see the results of that resilience reflected in this year's findings. More than half (58%) of the 1,100+ women we surveyed say they can see workplaces improving (up five percentage points year on year). This rises to 71% among women working for **WORK180 Endorsed Employers**, who are also around half as likely to be looking for a new role compared to women in non-endorsed organisations.

This report unpacks what's driving this progress and, crucially, where urgent action is needed in 2026. Because while gains have been made, one in ten feel that workplaces are actually worsening for women — a sentiment that increases among women also facing structural barriers such as racism, ableism, and ageism. What's more, nearly all women (95%) say they still encounter at least one barrier to workplace success.

From the resurgence of “boys' club” culture to new challenges created by poorly implemented AI (Artificial Intelligence) in the workplace, the issues highlighted in this report can't be ignored. They're the day-to-day conditions — often quiet, often cumulative — shaping whether women join, stay, feel safe, and progress in your organisation. That means they directly affect whether you meet your gender equality goals (and for Australian employers with 500+ employees, **WGEA target-setting requirements** now make this a compliance requirement).

We hope readers see the range of challenges shared in this report for what they truly are: opportunities to make tangible improvements over the next year. Let it spark new ideas, support the conversations that matter, and help you meet rising scrutiny with clarity and momentum. Use the guidance to focus your efforts, make changes you can stand behind, and build evidence of progress over the year ahead. Small, consistent actions compound.



V. Ignatieva

Valeria Ignatieva
CCO and Co-founder



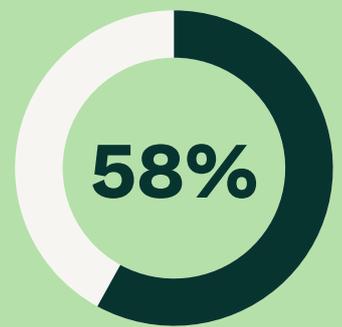
Gemma Lloyd

Gemma Lloyd
CEO and Co-founder

Key findings

Employers' efforts to improve gender equity are being noticed.

58% of 1,100+ women surveyed say workplaces are improving (a +5% increase from 2025).



Flexible working is the most-mentioned improvement – and it's supporting healthy work boundaries.

The #1 positive change reported by women is better flexible working policies (which was last year's most in-demand employer offering).

Over the same period, the share of women who can consistently set boundaries at work without worrying has risen from 16% to 24%.

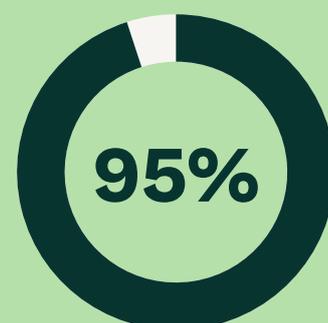
#1

But 1 in 10 women say workplaces are going backwards, for three main reasons:

- 1** Flexible working being poorly implemented/rolled back (including unclear rules and presenteeism)
 - 2** Backlash, regression, and employer fatigue around workplace gender equity efforts
 - 3** Workload and pay stagnation, with women taking on “invisible labour” without recognition
- +** Women facing structural barriers such as racism, ableism and ageism are even more likely to say things are getting worse

And barriers still remain.

95% of women say they face at least one barrier to succeeding at work, with “being judged or underestimated due to gender stereotypes” ranking as the top barrier.



Employers can't afford to overlook the impact of AI (artificial intelligence).

While it may not yet rank as a top concern, around **1 in 5 women** say AI is making their roles feel less secure. A further 1 in 5 report feeling nervous using AI, citing ethical concerns, unclear rules, and a lack of training.

This is a critical gap employers must close to ensure that AI reduces, not widens, gender inequality.



1/5

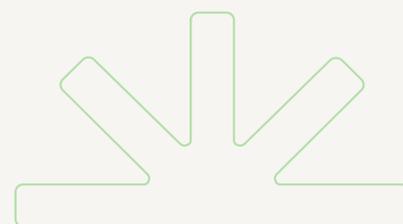
What do women want in 2026?

Balance and stability have moved to the top of the wish list.

Flexible working, pay transparency, and strong anti–sexual harassment policies remain very important to around 4 in 5 women; however, this year the highest priorities for women looking for a new employer are:

- 1 Job security:** average importance rating of 4.64 out of 5 (voted 5/5 by 73% of respondents)
- 2 Psychological safety** e.g. being able to speak up without fear: 4.64 out of 5 (voted 5/5 by 70% of respondents)
- 3 Respect for work-life boundaries/the right to disconnect:** 4.61 out of 5 (voted 5/5 by 71% of respondents)

This focus on balance and stability is understandable after a year of uncertainty, but it doesn't mean women are backing down. Despite the challenges, 37% are looking to level up (that is, to move to the next stage of their career or pursue senior leadership opportunities) in the next year — up 4% from last year.

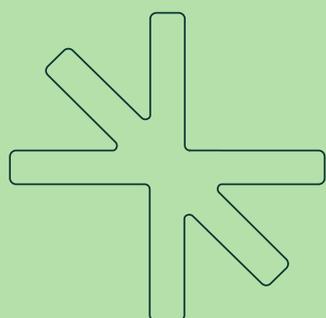


About the data

The data in this report is the result of a WORK180 survey, circulated both in and outside of our community of women. While the majority of respondents do identify as women, our survey was open to anyone who wished to share their voice.

Survey conducted September - October 2025

Total number of
survey respondents:

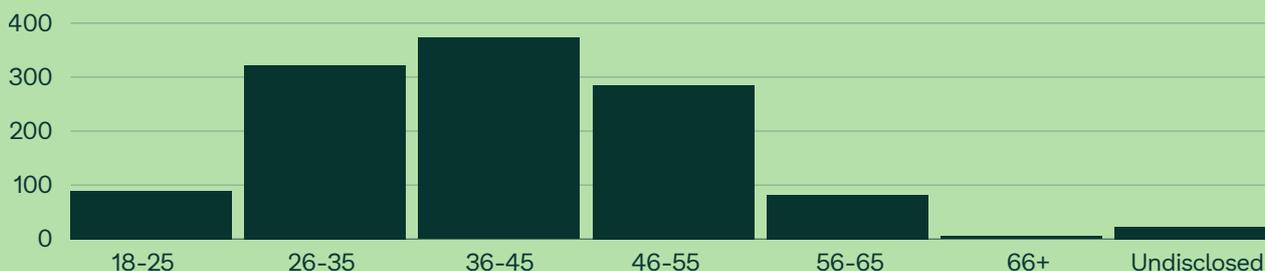


1,184

Participant demographics

The demographics of all survey respondents have been collected and presented to help readers view the report findings with an all-important intersectional lens. To aid in this intersectional reading, we have also actively amplified the voices of those underrepresented in their regions throughout this report wherever possible.

Age categories of respondents



Employment status

15.5%	Currently employed but actively looking for a new opportunity
39.3%	Currently employed and not looking for opportunities right now
41.8%	Currently employed but open to new opportunities
2.3%	Not currently employed
1.1%	Undisclosed

Gender

96.9%	Identified as a woman
1.1%	Identified as a man
0.9%	Identified as non-binary
0.1%	Also identified as transgender
1.2%	Preferred not to say
0.3%	Opted to provide an alternative identifier that was not listed

Current career stage

30.6% Established	Satisfied with where they're at for now
21.6% Leveling up	Focusing on moving to the next stage of their career
12.7% Ready to make a change	Considering a new role, industry, and/or employer
15.2% Leadership and beyond	Focusing on senior leadership opportunities, including board placements
7.5% Returning to work	Have had a period of absence as a result of health, parental commitments, travel, sabbatical, or other
6% Scaling back	Looking to reduce their workload and find greater flexibility
4.9% Starting out	About to enter the workforce or in an early stage role
1.4% Other	



8% of respondents stated they are part of the LGBTQIA+ community

Race and ethnicity

Respondents were invited to share their race and ethnicity through multiple-choice options and/or by self-defining. This context enabled us to analyse findings through an intersectional lens, better understand where inequities persist, and identify underrepresented voices that may need to be amplified.

95% of respondents chose to share this information, **collectively describing almost 300 unique racial and ethnic identities.**

These identities played an important role in our analysis process, and every effort was made to view responses in the context of how respondents self-defined. However, given the breadth of identities shared — and the format of this report — we've used groupings such as "White" and "Mixed/Multiple ethnicities" to provide the following overview of responses and summarise key intersectional findings throughout.

White - 70% (65% selected White only)



Asian - 15%



Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander - 2%



Black/Caribbean/African - 2%



Mixed/Multiple ethnicities - 8%



Specified alternative race/ethnicity - 2%



Did not disclose - 5%

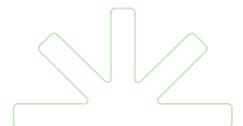


- Australia (76%)
- UK (20%)
- Other regions (3.5%)

Why has the percentage of White "only" been provided?

Around 5% of respondents who selected White did so alongside at least one other race or ethnicity.

This distinction has been highlighted because it is particularly important when interpreting findings through the lens of representation and White privilege within the primary regions surveyed.



Important note:

While the guidance in this report is based on careful intersectional analysis, we remind readers to consider any instances of grouping and labelling with their limitations in mind. For example, while 15% of respondents are classified as identifying as Asian, this represents dozens of unique identities, each with distinct cultural and social contexts.

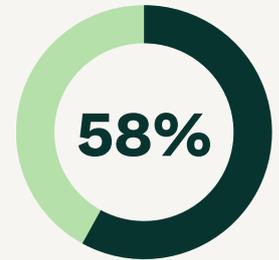


Part one: Where things stand today

This section draws on our most recent What Women Want Survey, alongside findings from last year's What Women Want Report, to show how the workplace landscape for women is shifting — where progress is being made, where challenges persist, and where action remains critical.

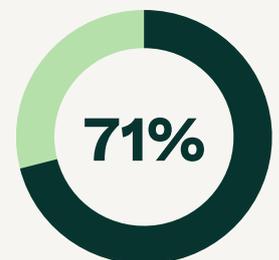
How are workplaces doing?

Last year, 53% of women said workplaces have improved over the last few years. This year, that number has increased to **58% (+5%)**.



We're pleased to see that this rises to **71% for those working for WORK180 Endorsed Employers!**

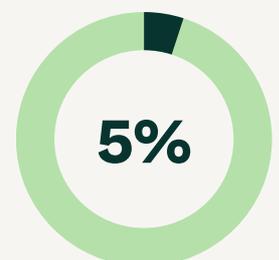
(Women working for Endorsed Employers are also around half as likely to be looking for a new role as those working at non-endorsed organisations.)



We also saw a slight year-on-year reduction in the proportion of respondents who say workplaces are actively worsening for women, from **12% to 10%**.



This reduces again to **5%** when we look at responses from women who work for Endorsed Employers only.



What do these improvements look like specifically?

Last year, women told us that their priorities were:

Flexible working

#1

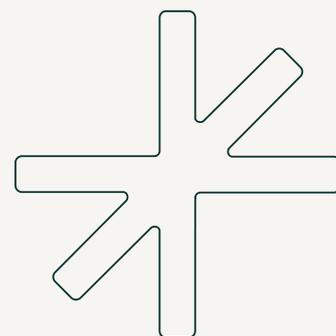
Zero-tolerance sexual harassment policy

#2

Pay transparency

#3

So let's start by seeing how employers have performed against these priorities over the past year...



This year, flexibility remains a priority, with 85% rating it as an important employee offering (and 65% rating it as “very” important).

Employers’ efforts here are starting to make a difference: among women who say workplaces have improved, flexible working is the single biggest driver of that change.

The improvements most often cited include:

Hybrid and remote work becoming more normalised

More flexible hours and work patterns

Better support for parents and carers

Formal flexible work policies

A slow but real shift away from stigma around working flexibly

“I benefitted from a more flexible and accepting workplace in being able to work around parental responsibility without judgement. This was also due to having male leaders and colleagues fulfilling similar commitments and **I believe the increase in men being more involved in parenting has normalised that flexibility to some degree.**”

White woman aged 46-55 years with parenting responsibilities

Flexible working allows employees greater control over when, where, and how they work. This plays a crucial role in helping them strike a healthy work–life balance and switch off outside work hours — a right that was strengthened in Australia with the introduction of the Right to Disconnect law in 2024.

We're pleased to see improvement in this area across both Australia and the UK:

Last year, only **16% of respondents** said they always manage to set boundaries between work and home life without worrying that this will negatively impact their careers. **This has increased to 24% in just one year.**



Around **60%** now say they can “always” or “often” switch off, and those who said “rarely” or “never” **dropped from 19% to 5%.**



Respondents who negotiated flexible arrangements over the last year are even more likely to say **they can “always” or “often” set boundaries** (around 2 in 3, versus just under 6 in 10 among others).



What the experts are saying:

“While it’s fantastic to see progress in this area, we can’t ease off. More than 1 in 10 respondents (11%) still say they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ feel able to set boundaries without worrying about their career.

And for some people, switching off is even harder. For example, while around 60% can switch off ‘always’ or ‘often’ overall, this falls to 50% for respondents who identified as Black/African/Caribbean, 52% for people who are unpaid carers, and 54% for people with a non-apparent (non-visible) disability.

Whether or not there is a formal ‘right to disconnect’ in place – as there is in Australia, but not yet in the UK – employers still have a responsibility to design work in ways that make switching off possible and career-safe. That means:

- Making expectations clear about contacting people outside agreed working hours
- Leading by example, with leaders and managers ‘disconnecting loudly’
- Equipping managers to support healthy boundaries, especially for people who already face barriers at work.”

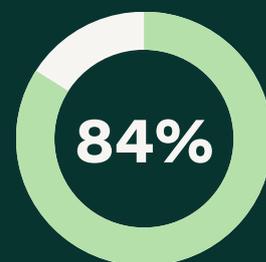
Hannah Davis, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Advisor at WORK180



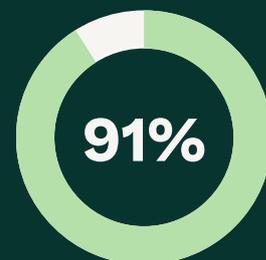
Last year, 74% of women told us that **pay transparency** was important when looking for a new employer.

To better understand what women are prioritising in this area, we sharpened the focus this year and asked more specific questions. We found that:

84% say transparency around gender pay gaps and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) progress is important when looking for an employer (with 56% rating it as “very” important).



A huge majority (**91%**) want to know **how pay is determined** to ensure fairness and equality.



“[Discussing pay or pay practices] is heavily frowned upon to avoid pay disparity, when if there was proper benchmarking in place for a role it wouldn't be an issue. **You could also realise how much you are worth if it was more widely discussed.**”

Woman of Mixed/Multiple ethnicities, aged 26-35 years, with parenting responsibilities

Unfortunately, more than half of women (59%) believe they are being held back in the workplace by a **lack of transparent information around pay and promotions.**

Respondents described experiences such as:

Being told off or discouraged from talking about pay

Being made to feel greedy or difficult for raising pay questions

Having to fight for fair pay or chase unexplained discrepancies

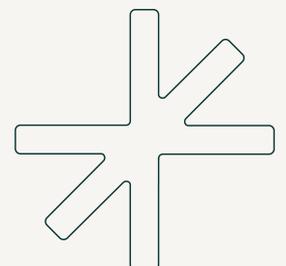
Discovering unfair gaps only by accident amid secretive or inconsistent practices

Doing higher-level work without clear pathways to recognition, promotion, or pay

“I have always been advised to never ask about pay during an interview and this means that every job I have gotten I have found out my salary after already starting the job.”

Aboriginal woman, aged 18–25, with a non-apparent (non-visible) disability, and who identifies as part of the LGBTQIA+ community

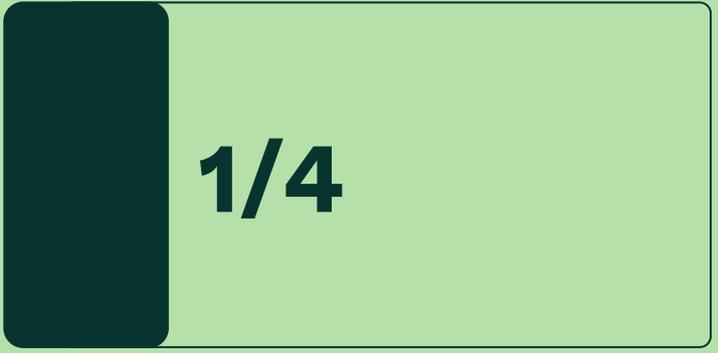
In summary, for many women it isn't only about the level of pay; **it's the lack of clarity around pay systems that feels like a barrier to their progression and sense of fairness.**



In both Australia and the UK, larger employers are already legally required to publish their gender pay gaps. But our findings show women want transparency to go beyond this: they want to understand how pay is set, how progression works, and to feel free to talk about it.

Currently, we're still not there:

1 in 4 respondents say they do not feel comfortable discussing pay.



1/4

Even more worryingly, **1 in 10** believe they are not allowed to discuss it at all.



1/10

In both Australia and the UK, employers cannot legally enforce policies that stop employees from discussing their pay with colleagues, especially when they are checking for fairness or potential discrimination, **so this is something to address straight away.**



What the experts are saying:

“Pay transparency doesn’t just attract more applications at the recruitment stage, it is a crucial indicator of commitment and a proven contributor to reducing your company’s gender pay gap.

We understand full transparency on individual salaries can be a sticking point for many companies, but there is still a lot you can do. Practical steps include:

- Publishing pay bands for roles and levels — both internally and externally
- Sharing clear pay and promotion criteria — including tailored guides and resources to support managers in having the conversation
- Actively encouraging conversations about pay, rather than quietly discouraging them. This recognises that greater pay transparency should benefit all, not just women — and requires building managers’ capability and confidence to welcome and lead these conversations productively

Right now, around 2 in 5 respondents say their employer does not make pay and promotion criteria clear, and 1 in 4 say they feel too uncomfortable discussing pay. So, even if you believe your organisation is promoting these discussions and providing this information, we urge you to review how clearly this is being communicated and understood in practice.”

Louise Rogers, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Advisor at WORK180

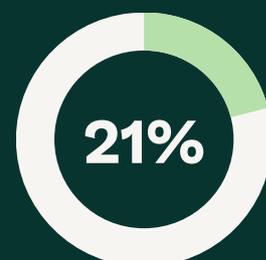


Last year, 74% of women said they wanted employers to have a zero-tolerance sexual harassment policy.

The demand for this policy continues this year, with 87% of respondents saying it is important and 63% saying it is “very” important.

Over the last year, many organisations have been required to be more transparent about their sexual harassment policies – and we’re pleased to see this starting to show up in employee confidence:

The proportion of women who are **not confident** that their employer would take appropriate action has fallen from **30% to 21%**.



The share who say **they wouldn't feel comfortable reporting sexual harassment at all** has halved from **6% to 3%**.



At the same time, there is clearly a long way to go:

3 in 10 respondents (31%) still feel that sexual harassment and bullying behaviour is holding women back in their careers.



We're also not seeing improvements in confidence consistently for everyone. For example, respondents who identify as LGBTQIA+ are noticeably less trusting that their employer would take appropriate action to sexual harassment complaints than others (around **26% vs 20% not confident**). People living with disability — whether apparent (visible) or non-apparent (non-visible) — show an even bigger decrease in confidence (**about 28% vs 19% not confident**).

In other words, people who already face greater barriers at work are also the least likely to believe organisational systems will protect them if something happens – so any work on “speaking up” or reporting needs to be designed and tested with all employees in mind, not just with the “average employee”.



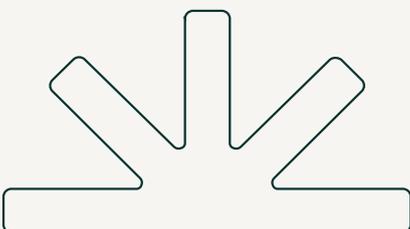
Getting this right remains a critical element of any workplace, especially as governments in both Australia and the UK have strengthened expectations on employers to **proactively prevent sexual harassment** and be more transparent about their policies.

It's also crucial for retaining women and other marginalised employees:

- Among respondents who **wouldn't** feel comfortable approaching their current employer about sexual harassment, 82% are open to or actively looking for a new role (32% actively).
- By comparison, among those who **would** feel comfortable approaching their employer, this drops to 58% (down 24 percentage points), and the share actively looking more than halves to 15% (down 17 points).

“Sometimes it feels hopeless to report sexual harassment because there are rarely repercussions or any real punishment. It's a difficult position because is groping a sackable offence or is it a warning? It starts to feel like a pick and choose of what should be taken seriously. Are some decisions worthy of a warning or some sort of demotion?”

Black woman, specified from Africa (first generation), aged 18–25



What has improved beyond the key focus areas?

We asked women to share the specific ways they feel workplaces have improved since last year. Their responses were largely attributed to:

- ✓ **More awareness of gender inequality and bias, and reduced stigma:** Respondents told us that diversity, equity, and inclusion are now discussed more openly, helping people feel more able to speak up. At the same time, several respondents stress that conversations now need to be backed by visible action, not just talk.
- ✓ **Better policies and supports:** Many women note improvements in areas such as parental leave, carers' leave, menopause support, flexible work frameworks, and HR processes. However, some highlight that these policies are applied inconsistently by managers.
- ✓ **More women in leadership:** Even incremental increases in women in senior roles make workplaces feel safer, fairer, and more equal, and help normalise women's presence in decision-making in the workplace.
- ✓ **Men's engagement in gender equity:** Some respondents describe positive shifts in male allyship and men calling out inappropriate behaviour. Unfortunately, others report ongoing resistance, suggesting progress can vary across an organisation and industry.
- ✓ **Cultural shifts towards inclusion and respect:** Women describe workplaces that feel more open and respectful, with greater focus on inclusion, psychological safety, and calling out poor behaviour — even if this is not yet consistent everywhere.
- ✓ **Increased visibility of gender issues in media and society:** The rise of gender equity in public debate, law, and media has helped legitimise workplace conversations. However, some flag that organisational improvements can sometimes feel driven by external pressures rather than genuine internal intent.

“I've seen positive changes in the workplace over the past few years, especially in how women are supported and recognised. Flexible working arrangements have also made a big difference. Being able to manage work around personal responsibilities has helped many women stay in the workforce and thrive.”

Asian Australian woman (specified Indian), aged 36–45, with parenting responsibilities, and works in a language that is not their native language

“I have seen companies share the good and the bad feedback, and seeing that value alive in the business and employees strive is actually empowering.”

Woman of Mixed/Multiple ethnicities, aged 18–25, an unpaid carer for a non-elderly adult, identifies as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and works in a language that is not their native language

“Flexible working is more visible than ever. I'm pleased to see maternity leave policies change to 'parental' leave, and younger generations of men more engaged in family life — I hope we don't lose momentum.”

White woman (specified Dutch and Scottish heritage) with parenting responsibilities

Congratulations on the progress! But, there's work to be done...

Across responses, women overwhelmingly feel that workplaces have improved, but not universally and not fast enough. Many emphasise that progress is patchy, inconsistent across industries, and often surface-level.

Sentiment breakdown of comments from women who said workplaces are improving:

- Around **70%** were positive or cautiously positive
- Around **20%** were mixed or conditional
- Around **10%** were sceptical, saying workplace improvements are “minimal” or “performative”

70%

20%

10%

What's more, **around 10% believe workplaces are actually worsening for women.**

Unsurprisingly, this cohort is the most likely to be planning to leave their employer in 2026.

72% are open to or actively looking for a new role, compared with 53% among those who believe workplaces have improved over the last few years.

72%

In fact, those who believe workplaces are worsening are **more than twice as likely to be actively looking for a new role** as those who think workplaces are improving (29% vs 11%).

The dominant sentiment among the 10% who believe workplaces have worsened is that they have become harsher, less supportive, and more regressive for women.

It's also important to note that the worsening of workplace experience can be compounded for people who already face existing structural and systemic barriers, such as racism, ableism, and ageism. For example:

Women in their late 50s and early 60s (56–65), as well as people with non-apparent (non-visible) disabilities, are around **1.6 times as likely** as average to say workplaces have worsened for women.

People with heavy caring responsibilities – especially unpaid and multi-generational carers – are around **2 times as likely** to feel things are worsening.

Respondents from marginalised racial and cultural backgrounds and ethnicities are roughly **2.2 times as likely** to say things have got worse.

“I think globally we have seen a shift in politics, particularly with Trump. This was and has been terrifying. Rights are being systematically removed for women and radical opinions are being legitimised on a global scale that can be felt in our daily interactions. I think many women, especially women of colour and in the LGBTQ community are generally feeling unsafe.”

White woman, aged 26–35, with a non-apparent (non-visible) disability

How exactly have workplaces worsened?

1. Reduced, removed, or poorly implemented flexibility

Flexible work is described as both one of the biggest improvements of recent years and, where it is being rolled back, the clearest way workplaces are worsening for women.

Common themes among those who said “things have got worse” include:

- Mandated office days that disproportionately hurt parents and carers
- Loss of autonomy, with stricter rules about where and when people work
- Two-tier flexibility, with some men informally getting more leeway than women
- Longer commutes leading to a reduction in family time and burnout
- A strong sense that reversing work flexibility is “anti-women”, given that it affects this cohort the most
- “Allowed” to work from home on paper, but a culture that penalises those who are not visibly present in the office
- Flexible arrangements depending heavily on individual managers, making it harder to ask for and consistently get what you need

“It worries me a lot that flexibility is still limited in the workforce and employers prefer people who can do set hours that are not friendly with people like me who have school aged children.”

Asian/Asian Australian woman, aged 36-45, with parenting responsibilities

Worsening flexibility — in the data

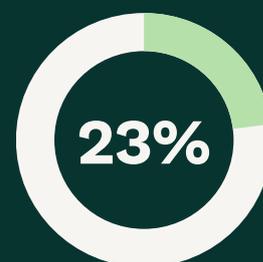
Just over **1 in 3 (36%)** respondents say women are being held back by limited access to flexible hours or remote working in general.



Over **1 in 2 (55%)** say this is due to a lack of flexible or part-time senior roles, limiting progression for carers and those needing non-traditional schedules.



Around **1 in 4 (23%)** say remote work makes it harder to be noticed, promoted, or connected – so when flexibility is available but poorly managed, it can create new inequities.



“There is a risk we'll go back to the 50s where women choose to stay out of the workforce because it's not possible to have work/life balance and support from employers.”

Woman of Mixed/Multiple ethnicities, aged 36–45, providing unpaid care for their parent/s and child/children

2. Backlash, regression, and DEI fatigue

A second, strongly reported pattern among those reporting worsened workplaces is a cultural and political backlash that makes it easier for organisations to pause or reverse workplace gender equity progress.

Respondents describe:

- Increased tolerance of sexist behaviour and microaggressions
- “Boys’ club” cultures resurfacing, especially at senior levels
- Women being spoken over, sidelined, or excluded more often
- A rise in misogynistic attitudes influenced by online influencers and “anti-woke” digital discourse
- Harassment, bullying, and poor behaviour being minimised or quietly protected
- Retaliation (formal or informal) for speaking up
- DEI fatigue: lip service instead of action, diversity efforts being cut back, and DEI roles being made redundant
- Concerns about a growing backlash against trans and non-binary people were raised particularly by respondents in the UK

“[I worry about] increased hostility towards policies relating to immigration, and disabled and trans people. This way only leads to more discrimination against other groups such as women.”

Non-binary person, aged 26–35, who chose not to disclose their race or ethnicity

Backlash, regression, and DEI fatigue — in the data

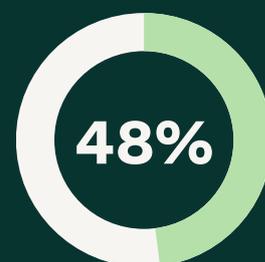
Around **1 in 3 (31%)** of all respondents say women's careers are being held back by harassment or hostile behaviours (including bullying, intimidation, and sexual harassment).



1 in 4 (25%) say women's careers are being held back because senior leaders and managers are not actively supporting fair, inclusive workplaces.



Nearly **1 in 2 (48%)** say women's careers are being held back by fear of the possible consequences of speaking up or challenging the status quo.



“Work is uncertain and security has lessened. This amplifies all the ‘less than’ behaviours: bullying, ostracising, intimidation, cliques, bro-teams. It doesn’t encourage people to speak up when they see harassment for fear of jeopardising their own role.”

Woman aged 46–55, who identifies as White and Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups, with parenting and unpaid caring responsibilities, and a non-apparent (non-visible) disability

3. More pressure, less security, and stalled representation

A third way workplaces are worsening for women is the combination of rising pressure, economic anxiety, and slow or stalled progress into leadership.

Respondents describe:

- Heavier workloads as teams shrink
- Increased expectations without increased pay
- Being stretched across roles, often “acting up” into the next level without formal recognition
- Emotional labour and team “glue work” quietly falling to them
- Picking up unpaid “office housework”, such as taking minutes, organising events, and smoothing conflict
- Feeling the economic squeeze and job insecurity at the same time

“I struggle to emotionally cater to friends and family after work because I will be emotionally drained from work. I won't be able to complete requests my family/partner will have for me because I will be burned out after carrying my own workload plus everyone else's around me — and constantly completing 'non promotable tasks'.”

South Asian woman, aged 18–25, working in a language that is not their native language

More pressure, less security, and stalled representation — in the data

Around **1 in 2 (50%)** believe women's careers have been particularly impacted by the cost of living and economic uncertainty.



3 in 10 (30%) say they have been promoted to a role with more responsibility without a corresponding pay increase.



More than **1 in 2 (54%)** say women's careers are being impacted by a lack of women's representation in leadership or important decision-making roles — and just under **1 in 2 (45%)** say there are not enough mentors, sponsors, or role models.



“In my former workplace, many smart women have resigned as there is no career path for them [...] Strong capable women are leaving and being replaced with men.”

White woman, aged 56–65

Also, while the majority say workplaces have improved for women, more than 95% of respondents **reported experiencing at least one barrier to workplace gender equity...**

“As a professional in my field (healthcare and medical services) and a woman in a management role, it is hard to be taken seriously by men in the industry and I face constant harassment and discrimination for my gender and physical appearance. I also find employers are still asking or alluding to illegal interview questions.”

White woman, aged 18–25, with a non-apparent (non-visible) disability and unpaid caring responsibilities for their parent/s

“Imagine needing to leave a meeting early to pick up your toddler, but the discussion runs long. You’re torn between being a reliable team member and a present parent — and that tension can be exhausting.”

Asian/Asian Australian woman, aged 36–45, with parenting responsibilities

The three most commonly* reported workplace barriers for women are:

#1 Gender stereotypes and behavioural expectations

58% say women are being judged or underestimated based on gender stereotypes (such as being seen as less committed or not suited to certain roles).

Similarly, more than half (51%) of women say they feel held back by gendered expectations that lead them to take on the majority of “office housework” — non-promotable tasks like organising social events and taking meeting notes. More than half (52%) also say women’s careers have been impacted by biased or unfair promotion decisions.

We also see women feeling the need to soften themselves to meet gender expectations. Another 58% say they have felt pressured to be “nice”, agreeable, or to avoid being seen as “too assertive” — rising to around 72% among women aged 18–25.

#2 Lack of transparency around pay and promotions

59% believe women’s careers are being held back by a lack of transparent information around pay and promotions (for example, not knowing what others earn or promotion processes).

As covered earlier in the report, there is a real challenge around women’s comfort in initiating these conversations — and this is not helped by the reactions they receive. Among those who have raised pay or pay fairness in the last year, 31% say they have been made to feel bad or uncomfortable. These stories include being told it is inappropriate, being shut down by a manager, or being treated as if raising pay is “making trouble”.

#3 Pressure to overperform and self-doubt

57% say women’s careers are being impacted by pressure to overperform and/or feelings of self-doubt.

We see potential exploitation of these feelings: 30% of women say they have been given more responsibility without a pay increase, meaning women are working harder under tighter behavioural constraints, for less recognition.

*Method note: Respondents selected from a list of 29 common workplace barriers for women, with the option to describe additional barriers in free text. The “top three” reported here reflect groups of conceptually related barriers rather than individual survey items. A full breakdown of barrier responses is available in the appendix (page 60).

Section summary:

Turning insights into action

By blocking progress for women in the workplace, the (often hidden) barriers and challenges shared in the first part of this report risk undermining and undoing the gender equity efforts many teams are investing time, money, and resources into.

This should be of particular concern for employers in Australia with 500+ employees, who are now legally required through WGEA (the Workplace Gender Equality Agency) to set and make progress on three gender equality targets over the next three years.

So, before we move on to what women are looking for in their next employer, we encourage you to pause and reflect on how the findings in this section relate to your own workplace. You might ask:

Q1. Where are we already on the right track?

For example, are our flexible working policies genuinely used and trusted? Do we act appropriately on prevention of and addressing sexual harassment? Is our approach to pay and career progression clear?

Q2. Who is benefiting, and who is not?

Look at your data from as many intersecting lenses as possible, such as age, gender, role level, caring responsibilities, ethnicity, and work pattern (e.g. part-time, casual, shift-based, remote). Are some groups still less able to switch off, feel psychologically safe reporting issues, or see how to progress?

Q3. Do our policies match people's lived experience?

On paper, we may have strong policies on flexibility, safety, and pay. In practice, do people feel comfortable using them without career consequences? Are managers applying them consistently?

Q4. How are we listening and closing the loop?

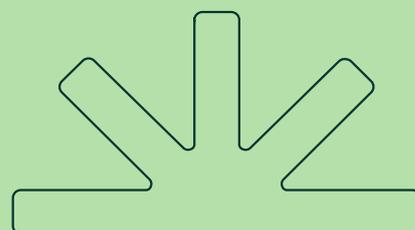
Do employees see evidence that speaking up leads to positive change? Are survey results and feedback shared with employees, along with what will happen next?

Q5. What will we prioritise in the next 12–24 months?

Based on these insights, which two or three areas will we focus on first? Who will be accountable, and how will we measure progress?

To really amplify this process, we recommend grounding it in data-driven analysis of your own workforce — an approach that has helped workplaces partnering with WORK180 **increase gender representation up to 12× faster than industry average.**

If you'd like to find out more about this approach, visit work180.com/how-we-can-help.



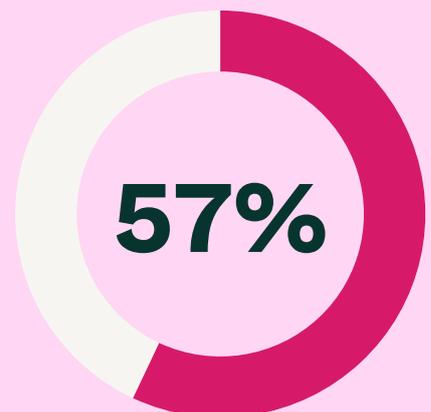
A woman in a hard hat and orange work shirt is smiling broadly, looking off to the side. In the background, other workers in hard hats and orange shirts are visible, slightly out of focus. The scene is set outdoors, possibly on a construction site, with a warm, golden light suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

Part two: Looking forward

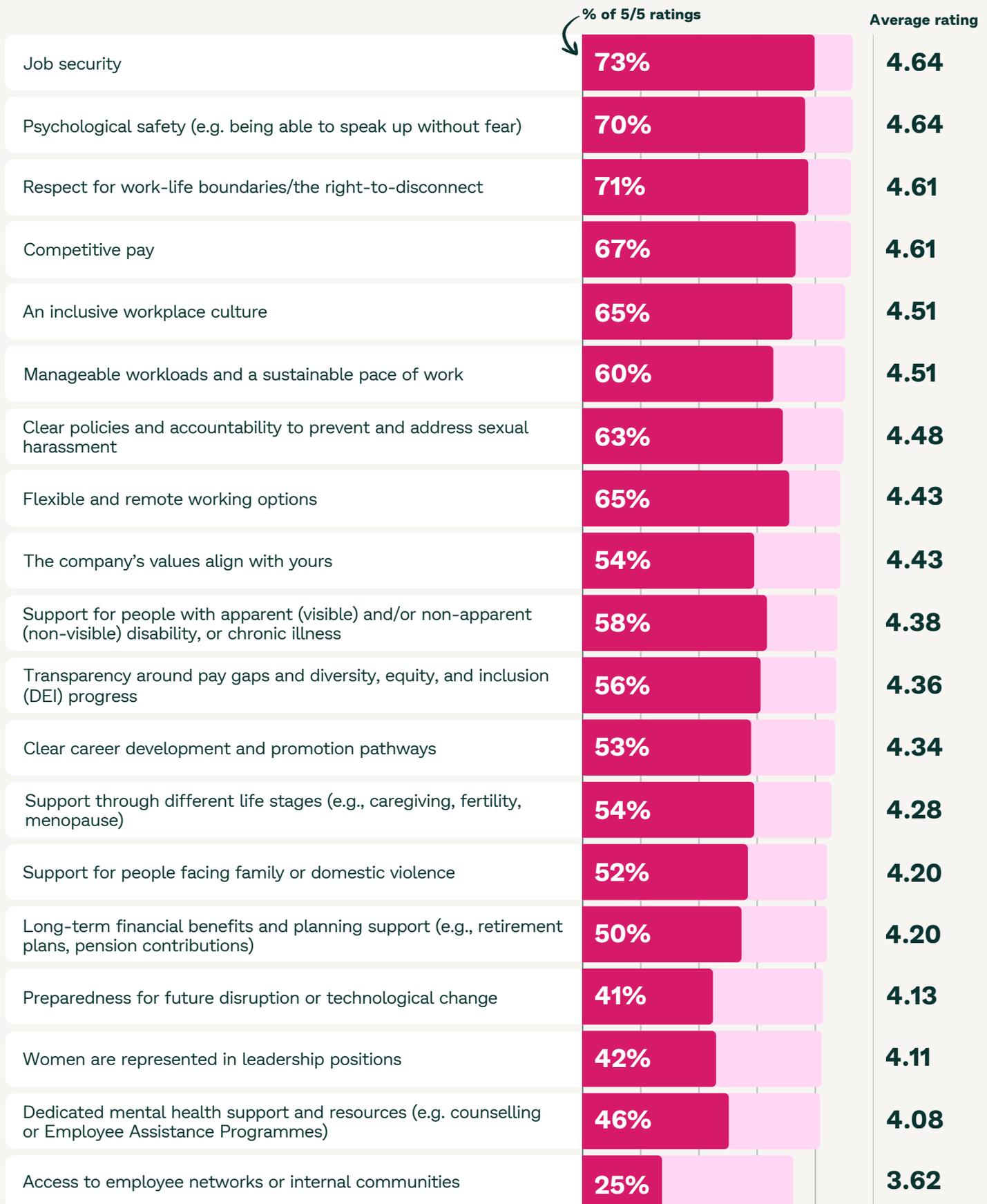
Now it's time to look forward to understand what workplaces can do to attract, nurture, and retain women in 2026.

57% of women are open to new career opportunities in 2026, with 15% “actively” looking!

So what will it take for your company to attract, retain, and nurture these job seekers?



We asked: How important are these employer offerings to you on a scale of 1 - 5?



Do these priorities differ by country?

Not by much. Women in Australia and the UK care most about the same four things: psychological safety, job security, competitive pay, and respect for work–life boundaries.

Australia	UK
Psychological safety (speak up without fear) #1	Job security #1
Job security #2	Respect for work-life boundaries / right to disconnect #2
Respect for work-life boundaries / right to disconnect #3	Psychological safety (speak up without fear) #3
Competitive pay #4	Competitive pay #4
Manageable workloads and a sustainable pace of work #5	An inclusive workplace culture #5

Where they differ is in emphasis:

Respondents in the UK place a stronger focus on clear rules and formal support systems. More women give the highest importance rating to:

- Clear career pathways (around 11 percentage points higher than in Australia), transparency around pay and diversity, equity and inclusion progress (around 8 percentage points higher)
- Visible women in leadership and access to employee networks (around 7–10 percentage points higher)
- Support across different life stages, such as parenting or caring responsibilities (around 8% points higher)

Respondents in Australia place slightly more emphasis on day-to-day experience. For example, manageable workloads received the highest rating from 61% of women in Australia, compared with 57% in the UK. Comments from Australian respondents also more often call for flexibility to be standard practice rather than a special arrangement.

Three key differences of note

1. Priorities are consistent across ages, but younger women are less willing to compromise

By age, the core workplace priorities stay the same: psychological safety, job security, competitive pay, and respect for work–life boundaries are top for everyone.

What changes is how strongly women insist on them. Younger women (especially those in their 20s) are more likely to rate multiple types of workplace policies as “very important”. They expect progression, flexibility, inclusion, and competitive pay together, not as trade-offs. Flexibility matters at all ages, but particularly for women aged 18–35.

For employers, the message is simple: Gen Z and Millennial women are not asking for a different list of priorities — they are simply less willing to compromise on them. As this cohort moves through their careers, these expectations are likely to become the norm rather than the exception.

2. Higher emphasis on family and safety support among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women

Differences by race and ethnicity are generally modest across most offerings. However, a few patterns stand out — particularly for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women on safety and protection, and (as we cover next) for women who identified as Asian on long-term financial security.

For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women:

- Support for employees experiencing family or domestic violence is rated “very important” by around 7 in 10, compared with around half of other women (roughly 16 percentage points higher)
- Policies and accountability to prevent and address sexual harassment are rated “very important” by around 7 in 10, compared with around 6 in 10 of other women (roughly 7% points higher)

For employers, this is an important reminder to ensure these policies are visible, culturally safe, and easy to access from the outset.

3. Lower-ranked offerings can be deal-breakers (especially for those working in a non-native language)

Almost 1 in 10 respondents work in a language that is not their native or primary language. For these women, workplace offerings that provide additional pastoral support and long-term financial security are rated as “very important”, despite being considered less important by the broader cohort.

Women using a different primary language at work are:

- 18 percentage points more likely than those using their native language to rate access to employee networks as “very important”
- 12 percentage points more likely to rate mental health support as “very important” than those using their native language
- 20 percentage points more likely than those using their native language to rate long-term financial benefits and planning support as “very important”. (A similar pattern is seen among women who identify as Asian, who are 24 percentage points more likely to do so (around 71% vs 47%))

In other words, don’t relegate these supports to the bottom shelf; for some women, they’re the reason they join and the reason they stay.

A note for WORK180 Endorsed Employers

If you’d like to understand how these patterns play out in your industry, locations or talent segments, [reach out to your WORK180 DEI Account Manager](#). They can organise a deeper dive into the data and help you prioritise the actions that will matter most to the women you want to attract and retain.

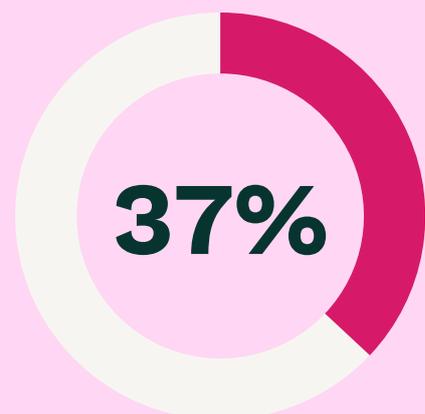


37% are looking to level up their career in the next year, 15% of whom are specifically focusing on leadership roles.

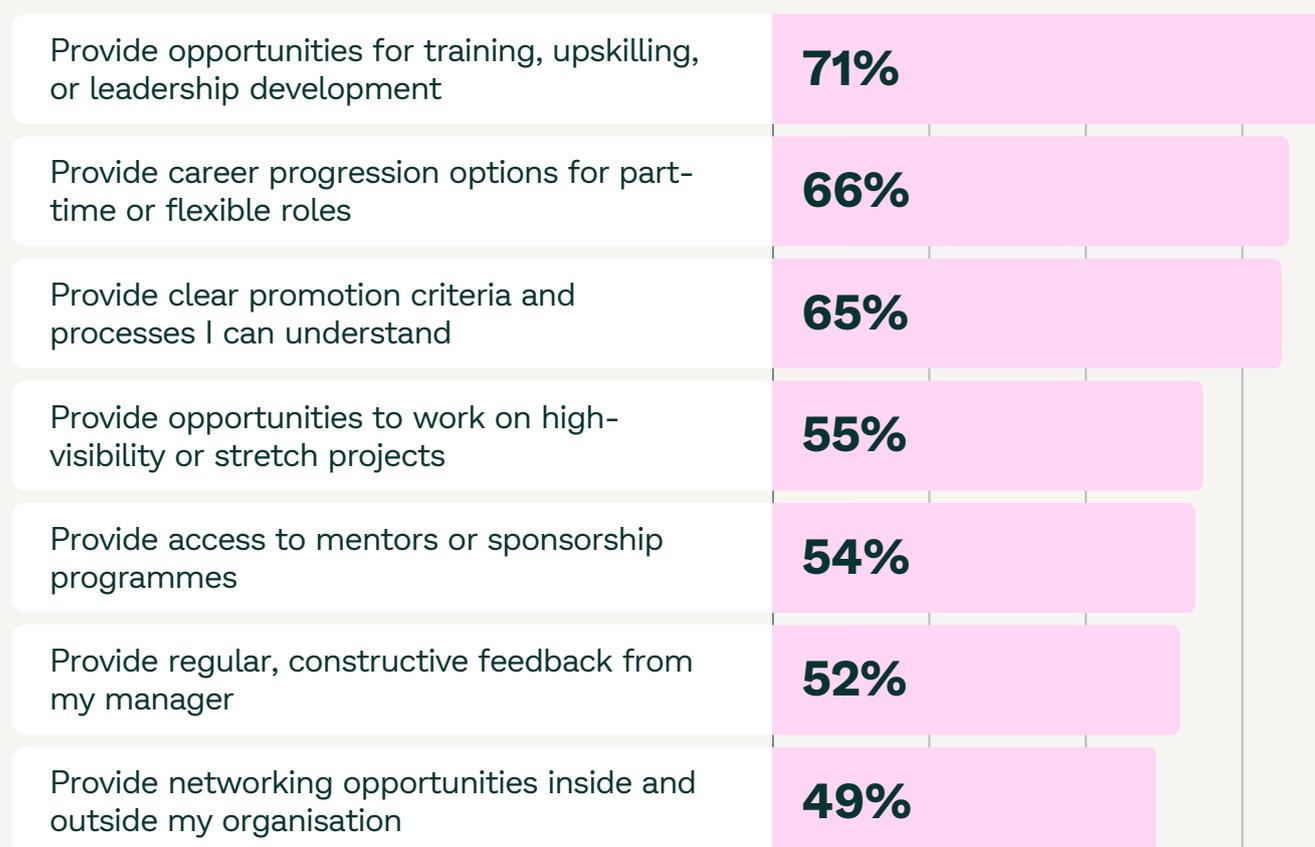
Nurturing women's careers must sit at the heart of any gender equality strategy — especially for the many organisations with persistent (and now largely public) gender pay gaps.

Remember, these pay gaps are a strong marker of representation and progression gaps: if women are missing from leadership and representation at each level of the business, no amount of 'like for like' salary tweaking will meaningfully close the gap.

So how can you best support their careers?
We asked women exactly that...



We asked: Which of the following actions could employers take to better support women's career development?



Our survey participants also called for meaningful flexibility and career development that includes — rather than excludes — men as allies. We had callouts for recognition of how caring responsibilities, disability, and different life stages shape women's careers, and a reminder for employers not to overlook more mature and older women.

They also pointed to structural issues that must be addressed for any career development initiatives to have real impact. For example, the benefits of these programmes are limited if structural barriers such as superannuation/pension gaps and informal "mates' networks" that advantage men in promotion decisions remain in place.



“Employers need to encourage women to speak their minds when they ask for promotions or pay rises. Employers also need to provide a trusting environment when these talks are happening.”

Madagascan woman, aged 46–55, working in a language that is not their native language, with parenting responsibilities

“Stop making promotions based on ‘additional work’. Women are unlikely to have the network and support to increase their bandwidth to do these extra tasks.”

White woman, aged 46–55, with parenting responsibilities

“A worry is a lack of male allies truly understanding and empathising to ensure those policies are effective. Equally, until we have things like better paternity leave for fathers/non-birthing parents, women will always be expected to be the primary caregiver.”

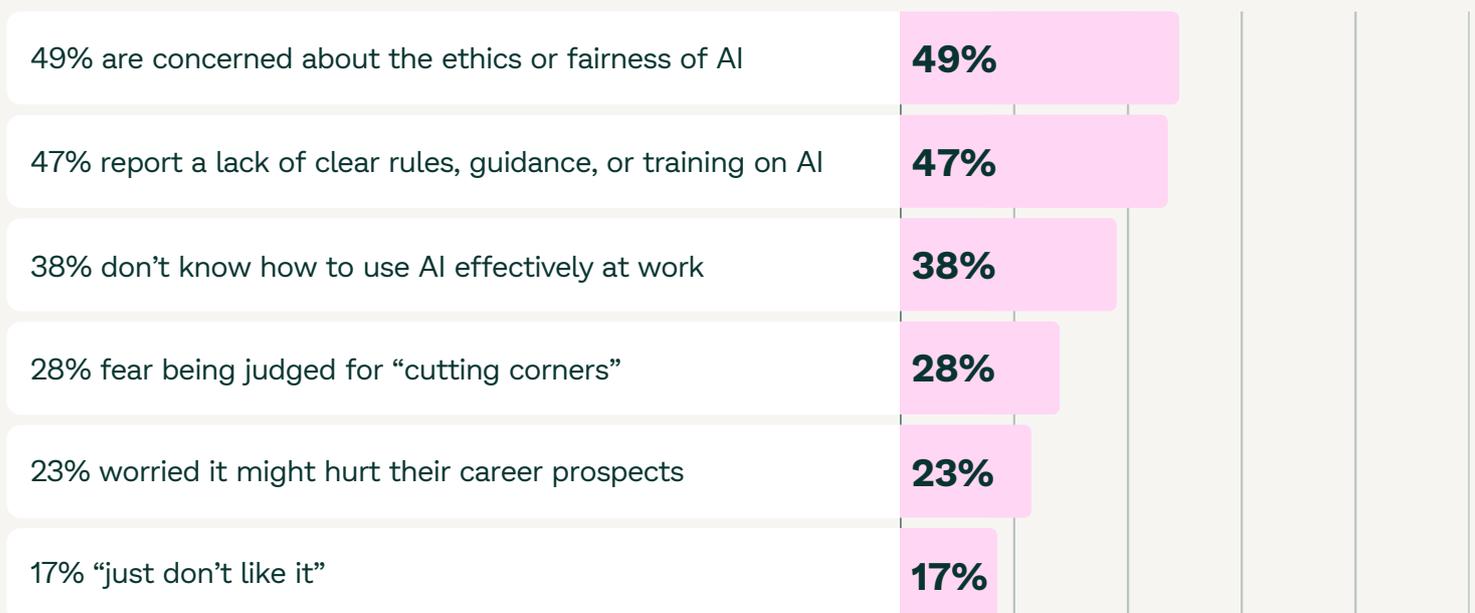
White woman, aged 36–45, with both apparent (visible) and non-apparent (non-visible) disabilities, and providing unpaid care for their parent/s

An important note on AI and women's careers

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) has risen rapidly across workplaces over the past year.

With systemic inequities historically channelling many women into roles and sectors that are most vulnerable to automation — and early research suggesting that gender expectations and inequities mean women are adopting AI at a slower rate than men — it's crucial that employers consider whether their current approach to this technology is helping or hindering their gender equality efforts.

To aid this thinking, we asked the respondents who said they had felt nervous or concerned about using AI at work over the last year to share why:



“We’re pushed by execs to implement AI but they don’t even know how and what tools to use so it’s overwhelming. Workload is heavy so they say automate as much as you can, and there’s not enough time to do the work and figure out how to use AI efficiently.”

White woman, aged 36–45, with parenting responsibilities

What the experts are saying:

“It’s clear that women’s adoption of AI isn’t about a lack of ability or ambition. For many organisations, this is simply a new space where the guardrails, training, and expectations haven’t fully caught up yet. At the same time, we know women can experience greater scrutiny and uneven rewards for risk-taking, which can make it harder to feel safe experimenting with new tools. That’s why employers have such an important role to play.

To harness the power of these tools equitably, organisations need to actively embed and encourage their use across the workforce, and make sure women are part of the conversation from the start. From choosing AI tools to defining how they’re used, diverse perspectives are essential to avoid bias. Women’s representation in AI strategy and governance isn’t optional; it’s critical to designing systems that work for everyone and build trust in new technologies.

If employers get this right, AI can become part of closing gender gaps — not widening them.”

Louise Rogers, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Advisor at WORK180



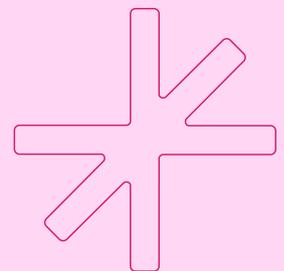
To get an understanding of what really matters day to day, we asked: **“What is one change an employer could make that would have the greatest positive impact on your life?”**

Across hundreds of responses, women and other respondents were strikingly consistent; the single most common answer centred on **genuine flexibility and work–life balance**. Most of the feedback also reinforced the primary themes covered throughout this report:

- Genuine flexibility and work–life balance
- Pay and financial security
- Career progression and development

Taken together, these insights underline a key message for employers:

The greatest positive impact for women will not come from a single new programme or policy, **but from getting the fundamentals of work right — and making them a lived reality every day.**



However, our experts also identified two strong cross-cutting themes from our survey responses that deserve clear attention in 2026: **support for women’s health across life stages and tackling persistent ageism.** —→

Two stand-out areas to focus on in 2026

1. Women's health across life stages

Many respondents described how work is still not designed with women's health in mind — from period pain and reproductive health, through fertility treatment and pregnancy, to perimenopause, menopause, and chronic health conditions.

Women highlighted the importance of:

- Being able to adjust hours or take time off when dealing with severe symptoms (such as period pain, fertility treatment, or menopausal symptoms) without stigma or career penalty
- Managers that acknowledge these realities, treat them as legitimate health needs, and respond with flexibility and understanding
- Clear, practical policies and guidance so leaders and colleagues know how to have respectful, confidential conversations about women's health

Respondent advice for employers:

“Draft HR policies with women of different ages and discuss flexible working arrangements that factor in menopause, menstrual cycles, etc. — especially for women who have been cultured with an upbringing to not speak much and to do the work rather than learn how to influence and be assertive.”

Asian/Asian Australian woman (specified Vietnamese), aged 26–35, working in a language that is not their native language

2. Age, ageism, and staying in work

A smaller but powerful group of respondents raised concerns about **ageism**, particularly for women in their 40s, 50s and beyond. They talked about feeling overlooked for development and promotion, being seen as “slowing down” or “less adaptable”, and worrying about retirement security after career breaks or years worked part-time.

Women highlighted the importance of:

- Having clear pathways to stay and progress in mid and later career — not being quietly written off or sidelined
- Ensuring that development, leadership opportunities, and future-skills training (including AI and new technology) are genuinely open to mid-career and older women
- Challenging age-based assumptions in performance, progression and redundancy decisions, and explicitly naming ageism as a workplace issue

Respondent advice for employers:

“Stop making assumptions about my abilities (including my willingness to adopt new technologies or ideas), beliefs or the value I can bring to a business based on my age or gender.”

White woman, aged 46–55, with a non-apparent (non-visible) disability

Want more specific advice every month?

Stay up to date by joining our mailing list! Get expert insights, best practices, and the latest updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

[Join now](#)



Closing comments



“Ready to put these insights into action? For employers already working with WORK180, know that these findings are actively integrated into the ongoing support your Account Manager provides throughout the year — and we encourage you to schedule time to unpack the insights most relevant to your industry, workforce, and goals.

For employers not yet working with us, our advice is this: implement the quick wins and learnings fast, but resist the urge to fix everything all at once. With over a decade of experience supporting employers to make clear, measurable progress in this space, we’ve seen the power of focus — targeting the specific issues affecting your organisation and following through consistently. This focus sits at the heart of our proven process, helping organisations progress gender equality up to 12× faster than industry peers.

And we’re seeing measurable, meaningful progress achieved across organisations of all sizes and sectors — a fact I hope brings reassurance to any large Australian organisations feeling daunted by WGEA’s newly mandated gender equality targets. Remember, the aim of these requirements (and what we hear time and again from women in our community) is not for employers to prove they’re perfect, but to prove they’re progressing.”

Gemma Lloyd, CEO of WORK180



Looking for inspiration?

The employers we support and endorse for their commitment to workplace equity are proving the power of a committed and transparent approach.

+141,000

Last year, WORK180 Endorsed Employers improved 4,000 employee benefits, positively impacting +141,000 women.

81%

Thanks to this progress, 81% maintained or increased the number of women employees overall.

86%

Strong leadership pipelines are also being built, with 86% retaining or increasing women in management roles.

By taking an active and transparent approach to benefits, policies, and progress, **Endorsed Employers are unsurprisingly standing out from the crowd** and capturing the attention of more than 1.5 million visitors to our career platform each year!



Could your company be eligible for endorsement and support?

[Take 2 mins to check](#)



**Endorsed
Employer**
For all women

More about WORK180

WORK180 began operations in 2015 and is a privately held organisation headquartered in Australia. We specialise in gender equity and apply an intersectional lens across all our work.

Our DEI Advisory Services team comprises DEI and HR experts who partner with workplaces to support progress towards gender equity. This work draws on the collective expertise of the entire WORK180 team, alongside robust data and benchmarking, including best-practice policy, DEI strategy development, data analysis and workshop facilitation.



WORK180 is proud to be officially certified by Social Traders, Australia’s national body for social enterprises. This gold standard certification recognises that we exist to create positive social impact, with profits directed toward that purpose rather than private gain.



The globally trusted choice for hundreds of leading employers



With special thanks

We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who participated in this year's survey. We acknowledge the time, effort, and thought required to provide this information, especially for those who revisited difficult topics or shared challenging experiences in the process.

We'd also like to thank the specific WORK180 Endorsed Employers who further demonstrated exceptional commitment to elevating women's voices and a willingness to learn by encouraging participation in this anonymous survey.





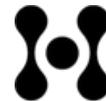
























Appendix: Glossary of terms

(in order of appearance)

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

A framework for creating workplaces that are fair, respectful, and representative of all individuals. Diversity focuses on bringing together people from different backgrounds, identities, and perspectives. Equity ensures fair access, opportunities, and support to eliminate systemic barriers. Inclusion fosters an environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and empowered to contribute fully.

Diversity

The presence of differences within a group, such as those based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, socioeconomic background, and other identity factors. Diversity brings a range of perspectives, experiences, and ideas to the workplace.

Equity

Providing fair treatment, access, and opportunities to all individuals while addressing barriers that disadvantage certain groups. Unlike equality, equity recognises that some groups may need more support to achieve comparable outcomes due to systemic barriers.

Equality

The concept of treating everyone the same, regardless of their circumstances. Unlike equity, equality does not address systemic barriers or unique needs that may lead to unequal outcomes.

How equity differs from equality

Equity provides support tailored to individual needs to achieve fairness, while equality assumes everyone starts on a level playing field. For example, equity ensures that marginalised groups receive the unique resources required to succeed, while equality offers the same resources to everyone, regardless of need.

Inclusion

Creating an environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute fully. Inclusion ensures that diverse voices are heard and considered in decision-making, fostering a sense of belonging.

Gender pay gap

The difference in average earnings between men and women, often used to highlight systemic inequities within workplaces. Pay gaps may be due to biases, occupational segregation, unequal progression, or other structural factors.

Pay transparency

Open, understandable information about how pay is set and how progression works—such as pay bands, salary ranges, promotion criteria, and the factors that influence pay decisions. Pay transparency helps both organisations and their employees assess fairness and supports accountability.

Intersectionality

The concept that individuals experience overlapping and interdependent forms of discrimination or privilege based on their unique identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, disability). Intersectionality acknowledges that these factors compound and influence experiences of inequity.

Marginalised and underrepresented groups

Populations excluded or disadvantaged due to systemic barriers, including women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities. These groups often face greater challenges in accessing equitable opportunities and outcomes.

LGBTQIA+

An acronym referring to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual (and can also include aromantic and agender identities). The “+” recognises other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities not explicitly listed but included within the broader LGBTQIA+ community.

Transparent policies

Policies and practices where employers openly share information about benefits, salaries, and initiatives related to equity and inclusion. Transparency fosters trust and accountability while empowering employees to make informed decisions.

Flexible working

Work arrangements that provide employees with control over how, when, and where they work. Examples include remote work, flextime, and compressed workweeks, which support work–life balance and break down workplace barriers.

Work–life boundaries

The ability to separate work from personal life in a way that protects rest, caring responsibilities, and wellbeing. Strong work–life boundaries are supported by clear expectations (e.g., reasonable workloads, respecting hours, and not rewarding constant availability).

Right to disconnect

Legal or organisational policies that protect employees' ability to disengage from work communications outside of their working hours. These policies help support work–life balance and mental wellbeing.

Zero-tolerance policies

Policies that strictly prohibit behaviours such as discrimination or harassment, ensuring clear, enforceable consequences for violations. Zero-tolerance policies are essential for creating safe and respectful workplaces.

Presenteeism bias

The tendency to value people who are visibly “present” (e.g., in the office, online after hours, or constantly available) over those who deliver outcomes through flexible or remote arrangements. Presenteeism bias can undermine flexible working, progression, and fair performance assessment.

DEI backlash / DEI fatigue

A shift in attitudes or organisational behaviour where equity and inclusion efforts face increased resistance, are deprioritised, or treated as “done already”. This may show up as reduced resourcing, reluctance to discuss equity, or rolling back initiatives—sometimes despite ongoing barriers.

Invisible labour (office housework / non-promotable work)

Often-unrecognised tasks that keep workplaces running but are less likely to lead to promotion or formal credit—such as taking meeting notes, organising events, scheduling, onboarding support, emotional labour, or “team glue” work. These tasks can fall disproportionately to women and marginalised employees.

Psychological safety

A workplace climate where people feel able to speak up, ask questions, admit mistakes, and raise concerns without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or negative career consequences. Psychological safety supports learning, inclusion, and early identification of risks such as bullying or harassment.

Artificial intelligence (AI)

Technology that enables computer systems to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as generating text, summarising information, analysing data, or automating routine work. In workplaces, AI can change how roles are performed and evaluated, making clear guidance, training, and fairness safeguards important.

Appendix: Full list of workplace barriers and response rates

Here is the full list of workplace barriers underlying the thematic findings presented on page 36: **The three most commonly reported workplace barriers for women.** It includes all barrier options and the percentage of respondents who selected each.

- Lack of transparent information around pay and promotions — **59%**
- Being judged or underestimated based on gender stereotypes — **58%**
- Not enough women in leadership or important decision-making roles — **57%**
- Pressure to overperform or feelings of self-doubt — **57%**
- Biased or unfair promotion decisions — **56%**
- Lack of flexible or part-time senior roles — **55%**
- Cost-of-living or economic uncertainty affecting job security — **54%**
- Insufficient workplace support for women's health needs — **52%**
- Gendered expectations leading to women taking on non-promotable tasks — **51%**
- People fearing the consequences of speaking up or challenging the status quo — **49%**
- Struggles balancing work and personal life due to lack of support — **49%**
- Not enough mentors, sponsors, or role models — **48%**
- Lack of recognition or appreciation for your work — **46%**
- Lack of clear progression pathways — **46%**
- Being excluded from workplace decisions, informal chats, or networking — **43%**
- Leaders not actively supporting fair, inclusive workplaces — **41%**
- Managers not actively supporting fair, inclusive workplaces — **39%**
- Limited access to mentorship or sponsorship — **37%**
- Limited access to flexible hours or remote work — **36%**

Unequal workload distribution — **36%**

Pushback from or negative reactions to employers' attempts to drive positive change — **34%**

Insufficient training or upskilling opportunities — **31%**

Poorly set up workplace policies or programmes — **31%**

Harassment or hostile behaviours (sexual harassment, bullying, intimidation) — **31%**

Limited access to workplace training or development opportunities — **28%**

Coworkers not actively supporting fair, inclusive workplaces — **27%**

Remote work making it harder to be noticed, promoted, or connected — **23%**

Tech changes or automation making your role feel less secure — **20%**

Legal or political changes making it harder to create fair, inclusive workplaces — **17%**

