

Built for All: Rethinking Career Advancement in Retail & CPG



LEAD Network partnered with **Shape Talent** to conduct a study aimed at identifying the root causes blocking career progression for women in the Retail/CPG industry

April 2026

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Preface

“Advancing women in our industry is a commitment both the LEAD Network and Shape Talent have made - and it’s one we are making good on.

Representation is improving, awareness is growing, and our corporate partners are investing in change. Our Gender Diversity Scorecard shows women hold 39% of senior executive roles in European Retail & CPG, +2ppt increase since 2023 and a + 14ppt increase since 2017. To reach 50/50, we need to understand what is still holding progress back. This research tells us clearly: the barriers that limit women’s progression, voice, and ambition are not relics of the past. They are present, measurable, and costly.

This report highlights the most prominent barriers for women in our industry. Notably, we see some of the same barriers for men, for people with no caregiving responsibilities, and for employees across all hierarchical levels. We have organised this information across four themes: Voice, Value, Caring, and Career Progression.

Our collaboration enables us to move beyond surface-level observations to understand not only what holds women back, but why. It’s also compelling to compare this industry-specific data to findings across broader European and UK research. In most cases, the findings are similar, reinforcing systemic dynamics that are embedded across leadership contexts.

Together, we have crafted some solutions to these challenges faced by women in our industry. This report includes a brief summary, and we have developed a detailed, industry-specific playbook created exclusively for LEAD Network partners. Not a partner yet? [Click here to learn more.](#)

Progress is possible. The path forward for our industry is clearer than ever before. Doing – not trying – is what comes next.



Allyson Zimmermann
CEO, LEAD Network



Sharon Peake
Founder & CEO, Shape Talent

About Our Study

This study was conducted to gather insights on barriers that women face specifically in the CPG and Retail industry.

We leveraged an evidence-based model exploring women's career progression, the Shape Talent Three Barriers Model®, a scientifically validated survey measuring barriers to career progression and identify solutions.

This report draws on responses from over 500 employees representing the CPG and Retail industry in Europe. We approached this survey through an intersectional lens, gathering perspectives across the lines of gender, caregiving status, disability status, job level, function, and age. We found statistically significant differences for **gender**, **caregiving status**, and **job level**. These results are highlighted in this report.

The findings provide insights into four themes – three crystallise the most pressing barriers women are faced with in our industry, and one relates directly to retention risk.

Across our industry and beyond, with the best of intentions, organisations have invested heavily in fixing women – negotiation training, confidence-building. However, we know that is not what creates change. The barriers we identify cross genders, and they are structural, cultural, and rooted in leadership behaviour. We are making a clarion call: stop fixing the individual. Start fixing the system.

While this report is a comparative snapshot of how gender continues to shape the experience, confidence, and career progression at work, much of what we report impacts men, women, and all people across genders. The solutions we recommend can uplift everyone in our industry. **Progress for women is progress for all.**



The Shape Talent
Three Barriers Model®

The Shape Talent Three Barriers Model[®]

The unspoken messages we all receive over our lifetimes which reinforce the ways in which men and women 'should' behave.



How women present in the workplace and manage the work-family interface. Women who behave counter to gender stereotypes face a subtle but material penalty for this.

The hurdles experienced in the workplace. Some of these are 'systemic,' such as key experiences and networks which are more difficult for women to access, and others relate to organisational cultures and norms which disadvantage women.

We found women in the Retail/CPG industry experience all three barriers, with organisational barriers as the most pronounced

67.9%

Of women

feel societal pressure to be primarily responsible for looking after their children and home
Compared to 46.2% of men

Shape Talent EU Report: 67%



70.9%

Of women

feel the pressure to conform to unspoken gender stereotypes or be penalised in their career
Compared with 44.5% of men

Shape Talent EU Report: 79%

78.6%

Of women

experience organisational barriers in workplaces that are still designed predominantly for men.
Compared to 62.2% of men

Shape Talent EU Report: 78%

4 Themes

Our research shows that women face multiple challenges at every stage of their career. The data reveals that women feel the need to edit themselves and hold back in meetings, they feel greedy asking for pay increases, and many feel that pursuing career growth makes them seen as a less committed caregiver. These represent the systems and cultures that hold women back. Notably, men, non-caregivers, and employees across all job levels are also impacted by some of these systemic, structural issues.

We have an opportunity, and a responsibility, to shape a better workplace for all.



01 Voice



02 Value



03 Care



04 Career Progression

Voice: The Silence Tax

Half of women walk into meetings worried about how they will come across. When so much of your workforce is editing themselves before speaking, the organisation is already losing.

49.8% of all women worry about how they come across in meetings, making this the single most widespread barrier in the survey. Women experience this at almost double the rate of men (only 25.4%).

This worry is experienced across intersections. Those without caring responsibilities (across all genders) feel this sharply, with 49.7% worrying about how they come across. In addition, frontline workers and managers of all genders also experience this barrier at a high rate, with 48.5% of frontline workers and 46.8% of team leaders across all genders reporting this worry.

Every time any employee edits herself, holds back an idea, or softens a challenge, the organisation loses: innovation stalls, questions go unasked, decisions are made without half the room's perspective, and performance wanes. We label this a **silence tax**, the costly organisational price of withheld potential, when belonging is never truly felt.

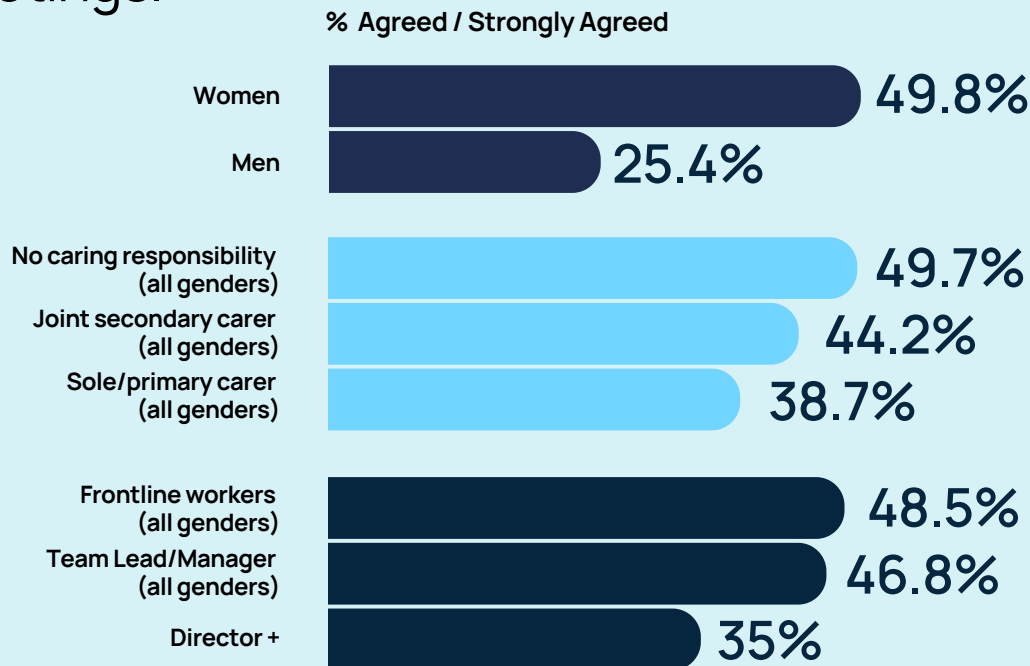


Reality Check

This data underscores the systemic weight of speaking up. **This is not about a lack of confidence or courage in women.** This is an organisation-level issue, one that crosses demographics. It comes with a cost – a silence tax. Without hearing all voices at the table, we simply cannot keep up with consumer demand or build products and stores that meet the needs of all.

Voice: The Silence Tax Cont.

“I worry about how I come across to others during meetings.



Thoughts from Participants...

“ When asking to be included in meetings where my work is used, I am not needed. If I am too assertive about being part of the areas my work is involved in, I am considered being difficult.

“ Men are by definition louder and more confident in meetings. They sometimes just repeat what a woman has said and actually that feedback is then considered vs. woman making the same comment.

Value: The Negotiation Penalty

The problem isn't that women don't negotiate. It's that negotiating costs them more.

43.8% of women feel greedy for asking for a pay rise. 39.4% fear the consequences.

Collectively, this data forms a **negotiation penalty**; women feel penalised for bringing up pay. Men and women experience this differently – with an over 20 percentage point gap in feelings of greed and ability to negotiate job offer terms. Pay-related anxiety cuts across caring status and role level, as well.

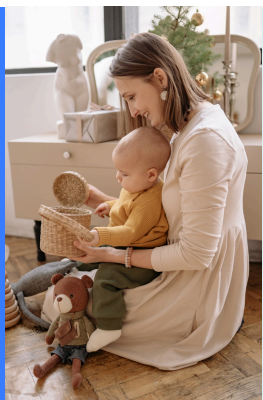
This highlights the unequal expectations shaping negotiation behaviour. Simply put: men are penalised less than others.

This is not about the negotiation tactics of women. This comes down to creating an organisational culture and system that is open to everyone raising issues with their pay – and one where those issues are heard. When employees perceive the process is closed to them, they simply do not stay.¹

Thoughts from Participants...

“ There is still a huge difference in payment expectations and opportunities depending on gender.

“ I struggle with the thought of requesting a pay review... My pay is fair; however, I do think there is merit in looking for a review as my role scope has expanded. I am definitely not comfortable having that discussion.



Reality Check

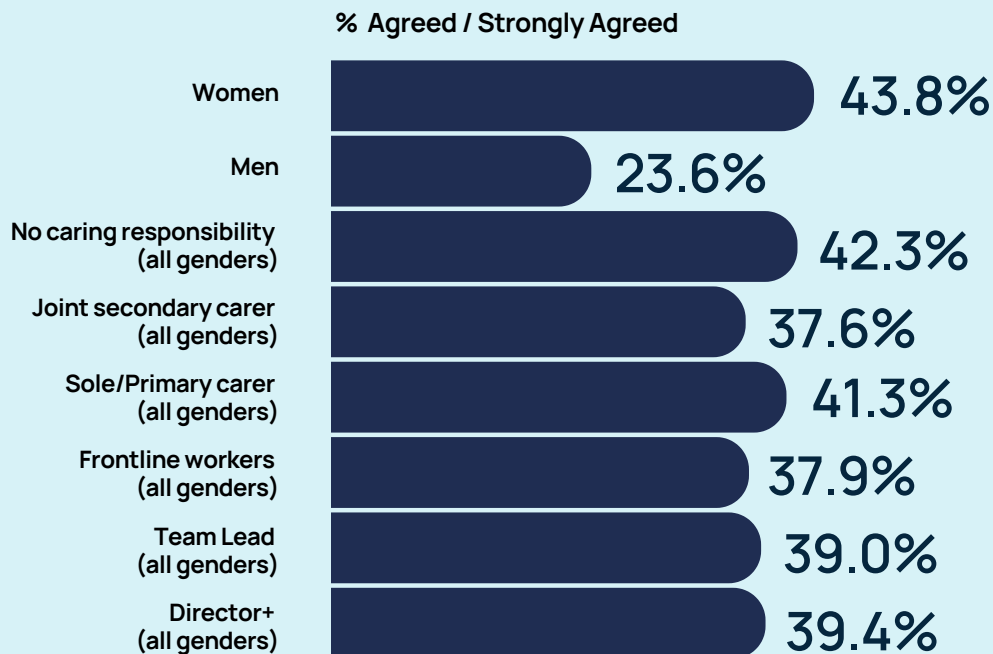
Breaking through a myth that women experience negative impacts on pay due to gaps in work and motherhood, **those with no caregiving responsibilities experience this negotiation penalty at a higher rate than others**, and team leads and managers also report difficulty negotiating job offer terms (38.2%). These pressures spike at critical career transitions across all genders.

¹DeConinck, J. B., & Stilwell, C. D. (2004). Incorporating organisational justice, role states, pay satisfaction and supervisor satisfaction in a model of turnover intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 57(3), 225–231.

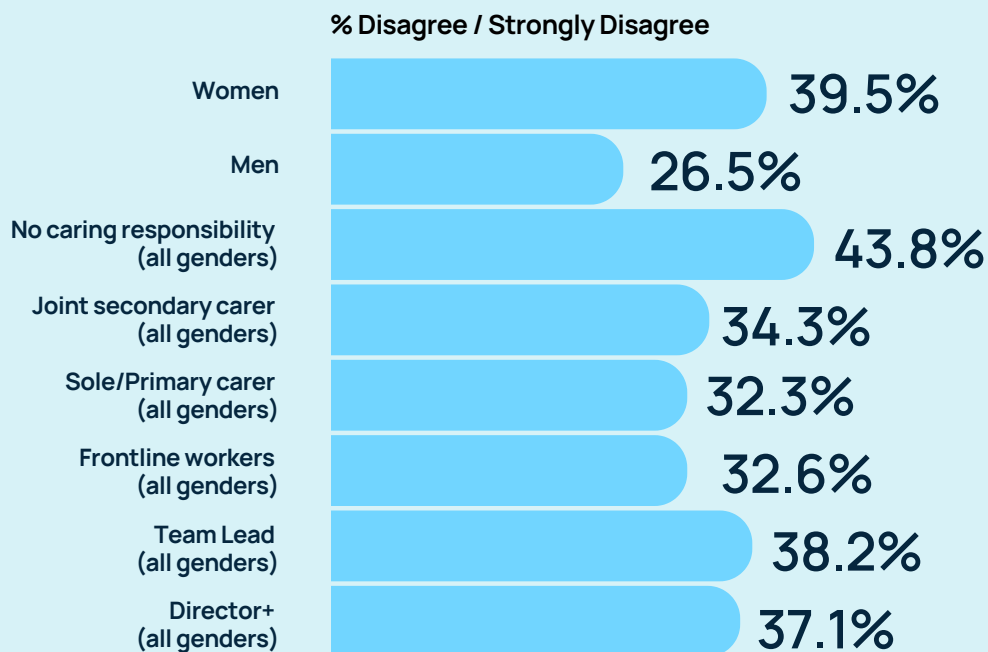


Value: The Negotiation Penalty Cont.

“I feel greedy asking for a pay rise



“I felt able to negotiate the terms of my last job offer



Care: The Caregiving Trade-Off

The trade-off between career and caregiving is a pressure point for women, team leaders, primary carers, and – increasingly – for men, too.

Over a third of women (34.8%) believe that pursuing career growth makes them a lesser parent or carer, nearly double the rate for men (18%).

This trade-off reflects policy and gendered cultural expectations, with a 16.8 percentage point difference between men and women. This feeling extends beyond women: 37.9% of team leads across all genders report the same. This belief does not exist in isolation. It is embedded in organisational systems and cultures where visibility is rewarded and flexibility is penalised.

In fact, more men are taking on caregiving responsibilities in our industry. 73% of men in our survey report some level of care responsibility, and they are particularly vulnerable. 60% of male sole carers say their network has not supported their career, compared with 30% of women carers. This may reflect what research calls a 'fatherhood forfeit'², where working fathers trade a positive work experience for being an active parent. This forfeit can experience stigma and social impacts, which is showing up in our data as reduced network support.

Thoughts from Participants...

“ I'm faced with the lack of time to network as a working mother and therefore limited ability to build the relationships needed for faster progression.

“ My greatest barrier to career progression is maintaining the flexibility I have in my current role. I want to be a good parent as well as successfully execute leadership responsibilities.



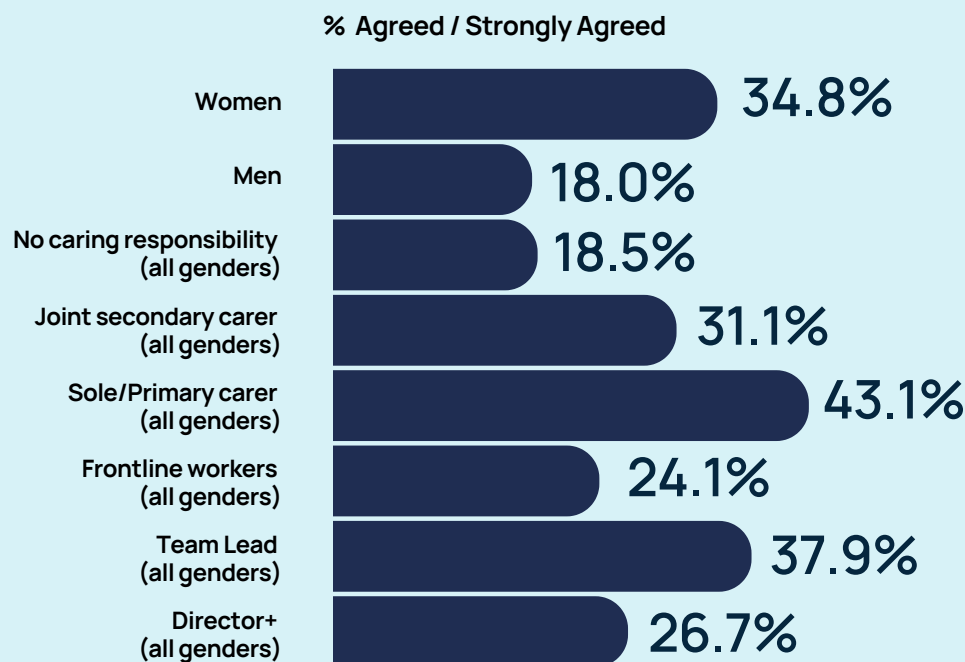
Reality Check

For primary carers of all genders, over 43% feel that pursuing career growth makes them a lesser parent or carer, more than double the rate of those without caring responsibilities. **Solving for these challenges benefits men and women.** We can strengthen the culture for everyone, creating an environment conducive to high performance.

²Kellan, J. (2022). Caregiving fathers in the Workplace: Organisational Experiences and Fatherhood Forfeit. Palgrave Macmillan.

Care: The Caregiving Trade-Off Cont.

“I feel that if I pursue career progression then I am not a good parent/carer.



Thoughts from Participants...

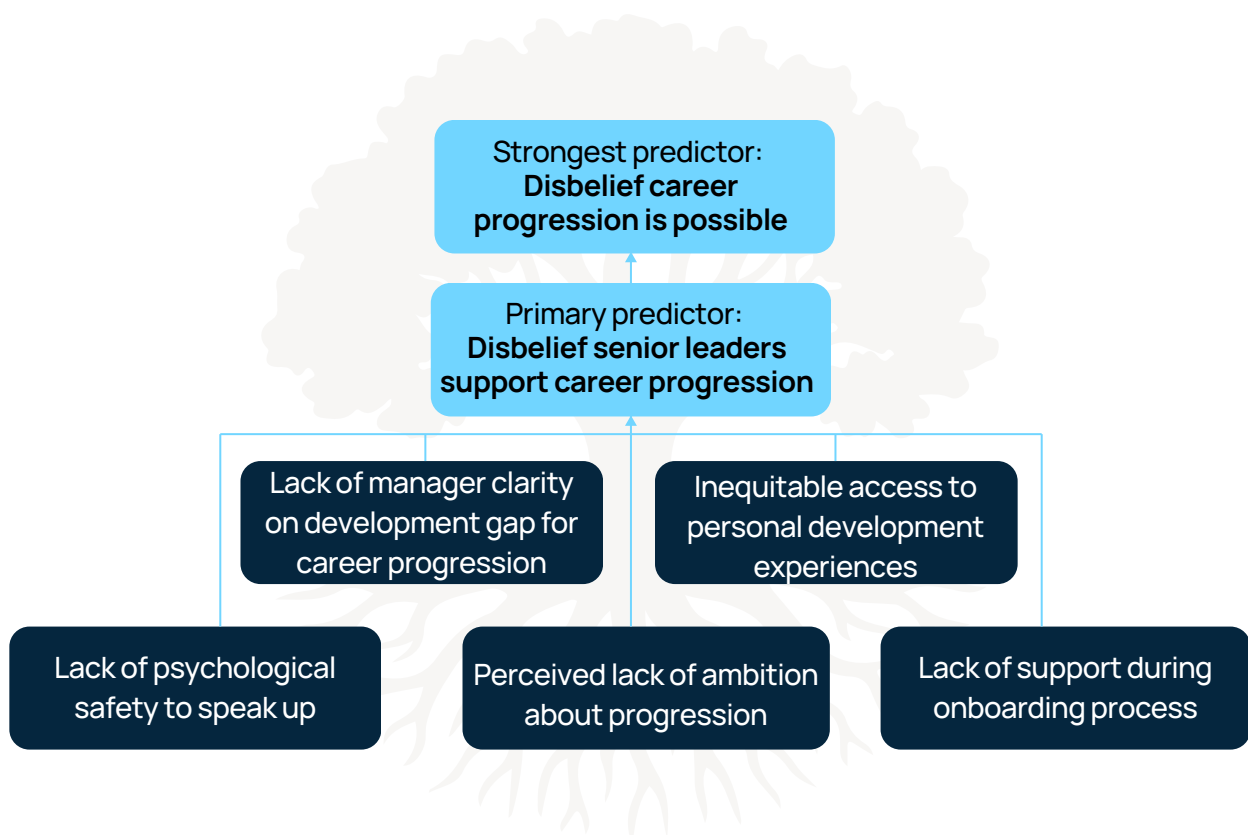
“ After my leave, I was unable to return to my original role and was offered a position in another department. A few months in, I found myself struggling to balance the demands of a newborn with the expectations of the business. Due to high expectations and my lack of prior experience in the department, I was labelled as underperforming.

“ The greatest barrier to career progression? My home and caring responsibilities.

Career Progression: The Uneven Pathway

The root cause of turnover is organisational. So is the fix. Clear growth conversations. Equitable development. Leaders who mean it. That's the kind of culture that retains women – and all employees.

We conducted a root cause analysis³, looking at turnover drivers within our industry. Perceived lack of career progression is the strongest predictor of intention to leave. Our data shows that when employees believe they cannot progress within the organisation, the likelihood that they will leave for another opportunity increases significantly.



Thoughts from Participants...

“Development feedback can often be an unclear expectation rather than a concrete path forward. This often reduces motivation to keep over-delivering and can contribute as to why many women in similar situations step back and focus on work-life balance instead of pursuing further growth.

“Recognition and progression only seem to come when circumstances force it.

“Senior managers stay in their roles for long periods, limiting promotional opportunities.

³Method: CHAID (Chi-squared Automatic Interaction Detection) | n=525 valid respondents

Career Progression: The Uneven Pathway Cont.

This belief is shaped by uneven pathways, comprised of unclear development conversations and inequitable access to development opportunities. In fact, women are 2.5x more likely than men to feel their manager has not clearly communicated what they need to do to progress.

However, the most impactful driver comes from the top. When senior leaders are unsupportive of career progression, retention risk is more likely. Ultimately, leadership signals increase belief in growth. A strong culture of growth, where pathways are clear and equitable, cannot be created by more unconscious bias training programmes or Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). This requires visible advocacy and sponsorship from leaders who actively invest in the progression of their people.

The leader has the single biggest impact on creating a culture where everyone can progress. Not unconscious bias training. Not ERGs. The leader.

Strong growth cultures live in the everyday moments – who gets nominated, who gets sponsored, who gets stretched, and who gets seen.

Thoughts from Participants...

“ I wish I received more support from senior management – especially the line manager.

“ The organisation’s performance system has been a barrier. When I joined, the structure was unclear, and now I realise my results place me at the lower end of the managerial scale, resulting in several years before I am eligible for promotion despite performing responsibilities comparable to peers with higher rankings.

Reality Check

Ambition is formed downstream of opportunity – it is not a result of gender, caregiving status, or generation. An employee’s sense of ambition is directly **linked to how realistic career progression feels** within the organisation. Where the path forward is uneven and invisible, ambition stalls. When leadership support for progression is limited, ambition fades. It’s not a personal failing, or a feeling one brings to the job. It’s a rational response to **structural and cultural barriers**.



Final Thoughts

These four themes do not exist in isolation. They reflect the cumulative effect of organisational systems and culture on careers, capability, and contribution.

Addressing each one strengthens the system for everyone. Having a voice at the table, advocating for one's value, caregiving support, and cultures that enable thriving careers – these are not nice-to-haves. They are essential levers of competitive advantage.



[Themed Recommendations](#)

Themed Recommendations

The data is clear. These are organisational problems that need organisational solutions. These solutions are not difficult; they require intention and commitment. Together, we can make our industry supportive for women, men, and all employees, ensuring businesses thrive.

Voice

Eliminate the silence tax.

- Train leaders to create environments where speaking up carries no penalty
- Embed psychological safety behaviours into leadership performance expectations
- Make inclusive meeting behaviours visible, modelled, and measured

Value

Address the negotiation penalty.

- Make salary ranges visible, removing ambiguity about pay across all locations (not just EU)
- Train hiring managers and recruiting teams – not women – to support **all** employees advocating for themselves during the offer process
- Signal to all that negotiations are expected throughout the offer process

Care

Build workplaces that work for all caregivers, all genders.

- Implement flexible work policies, tailored to all levels and all roles
- Analyse how flexible options are being utilised across different demographics, and build systemic solutions that ensure employees of all genders to take advantage of these options
- Normalise caregiving policies for all genders, actively encouraging uptake and openly reduce the stigma and potential career penalties

Career Progression

Design systems that support career progression for all and increase leadership accountability.

- Define and communicate clear, flexible non-linear career pathways and success profiles for key roles, presented in a simple and accessible way for all employees
- Develop clear and transparent promotion criteria tied to practical development interventions that improve readiness, and focus on the development of benchstrength over a multi-year timeframe
- Establish formal sponsorship programmes that actively connect leaders with high-potential across all backgrounds. Hold leaders accountable for sponsoring and developing their whole team



**Solutions Playbook exclusively
available for our Partner Members**

Methodology

Findings are based on the Three Barriers Diagnostic Survey®, completed by 535 employees across the LEAD Network. The sample was predominantly female (77%, n = 404), with men comprising 22% (n = 119) and 12 participants preferred not to disclose their gender. Respondents represented a range of carer statuses, role levels, and functions. To support robust analysis, smaller categories were aggregated into analytically meaningful groups, including Sole/Primary Carers (n = 112) and Joint/Secondary Carers (n = 234), as well as Front Line (n = 99), Team Lead/Manager (n = 270), and Director+ (n = 137) roles.

Disability status was excluded from demographic analysis and reporting, as the number of respondents identifying as having a disability did not meet the minimum threshold for either statistical testing or descriptive reporting.

Responses across 16 sub-barriers were analysed by gender, carer status, role level, and function. A minimum threshold of 30 respondents per group was applied for significance testing; where this threshold was not met, results are reported for context only. Aggregation decisions were made to enable meaningful and statistically robust comparisons, and all findings described as significant were formally tested, with all other patterns clearly labelled as descriptive.

Barriers to women's career progression were measured using the Three Barriers to Women's Career Progression Scale (TBWCPS), a scientifically validated instrument assessing barriers across societal (5 items), organisational (15 items), and personal (4 items) domains. Each domain comprises multiple sub-barriers measuring the presence and strength of barriers. The scale demonstrates strong internal reliability across all domains (Cronbach's α = 0.80 societal; 0.90 organisational; 0.73 personal), with excellent reliability for the overall scale (α = 0.92).

All percentage-point differences described as "significant" in this report have been formally tested using two-proportion z-tests, with associated p-values and Cohen's d effect sizes reported. Where findings are described as descriptive only, this is explicitly stated.

Demographic	Groups- not aggregated
Gender	Female (404), Male (119), Non-Binary (1), Prefer not to say (12)
Carer Status	Sole (31), Primary (81), Joint (207), Secondary (27), No caring (164), Prefer not to say (26) - Grouped sole with primary, and joint with secondary caring responsibilities
Role level	Front Line (99), Team Lead (43), Manager (227), Director (101), GM/SVP/VP (26), C-suite (10), Prefer not to say (30) - Group Team Lead and Manager then Director + for all other senior levels
Disability	Yes (12), No (496), Prefer not to say (28) - Did not meet the threshold for analysis (qualitative methods recommended to explore the experiences of this demographic)
Function/Role Type	Sales (132), Operations (78), Marketing (72), HR (60), Finance (54), Other (52), Supply Chain (47), IT (20), R&D (19), Legal (2). Group as P&L and No P&L function to meet threshold but not statistical significance established between both groups and therefore not reported

Contributors



Sarah McGowan

Strategic Research & Learning Advisor, LEAD Network

Sarah is passionate about unlocking human potential and transforming organisations from the inside out. For over 25 years, she has partnered with leaders to build thriving cultures and develop people who create value as they grow. During her time as Senior Vice President at Ahold Delhaize, she led global talent initiatives for 400,000+ associates across 19 brands, reinforcing the power of connecting people to purpose at scale.

Sarah is the co-founder of **The Talent Project**, a consultancy dedicated to delivering talent wins through evidence-based methods. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Executive Leadership at Clemson University, building on her MBA from Boston College, and Masters of Human Resources from Michigan State University, and is a Lecturer at Northeastern University.



Alison Wilson

Chief Operating Officer, Shape Talent

Alison is Chief Operating Officer at Shape Talent. A Chartered Chemical Engineer, she has over 20 years' experience across the consumer goods, pharmaceutical, and medical device industries, holding both technical and senior leadership roles at Procter & Gamble, GSK, and PwC.

Alison brings strong analytical rigour to her work and is highly skilled at interrogating complex quantitative data to inform strategic decision-making. With deep experience in regulated, data-intensive environments, she translates technical and operational metrics into clear, evidence-based insight, ensuring that strategy and operations are grounded in robust analysis. An accredited coach, Alison is passionate about equity in leadership and building high-performing, inclusive organisations.



Dr. Priscila Pereira

Director of Research and Innovation, Shape Talent

Dr Priscila Pereira is Director of Research and Product Innovation at Shape Talent. She began her PhD in Gender Studies in 2007 while working as an in-house practitioner, going on to hold several European and global leadership roles, including HR Director, Vice President of Learning and Development, and Head of Talent, Leadership and Inclusion.

Priscila is an accredited coach and has supported women worldwide to progress into senior leadership roles. She is also a Visiting Lecturer in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at Henley Business School and was previously part of the University's Centre for Diversity Policy, Research and Practice. She is co-author of *Simplifying Inclusive Leadership* (Routledge).

About Shape Talent

We are an award-winning gender equity consultancy and we partner with forward-thinking organisations who are serious about gender equity.

As experts in the design and delivery of results-driven gender equity programmes, Shape Talent brings together a psychology-led philosophy with evidence-based methodologies.

We help organisations make the sustainable change that leads to diverse and inclusive cultures where people and business can thrive.

We have extensive experience working with organisations across the retail and CPG sector, and understand the specific challenges and opportunities the industry faces when it comes to gender equity.

Clients Served



Want to know more?
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Appendix (Data)

Appendix (Data)

Top 5 Barriers by Gender

#1	I worry about how I come across to others during meetings	Women 49.8 % Men 25.4%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#2	I feel greedy for asking for a pay rise	Women 43.8% Men 23.6%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#3	I felt able to negotiate the terms of my last job offer if necessary	Women 39.5% Men 26.5%	Disagreed/ Strongly Disagreed
#4	I worry about the consequences of asking for a pay rise and being unsuccessful	Women 39.4% Men 20.7%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#5	I feel that if I pursue career progression then I am not a good parent/carer	Women 34.8% Men 18.0%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed

Top five gender gaps across sub-barriers

#1	I worry about how I come across to others during meetings	Women 49.8 % Men 25.4%% GAP: 24.4 pp	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#2	I feel greedy for asking for a pay rise	Women 43.8% Men 23.6% GAP: 20.2 pp	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#3	I worry about the consequences of asking for a pay rise and being unsuccessful	Women 39.5% Men 20.7% GAP: 18.7 pp	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#4	I feel that my manager is clear with me about my developmental gaps to get to the next step in my career	Women 29.6% Men 12.0% GAP: 17.6 pp	Disagreed/ Strongly Disagreed
#5	I feel that if I pursue career progression then I am not a good parent/carer	Women 34.8% Men 18.0% GAP: 16.8 pp	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed

Appendix (Data) Cont.

Top 5 Barriers for Caregivers

#1	I worry about how I come across to others during meetings	No caring responsibility 49.7 % Joint secondary carer 44.2% Sole/Primary carer 38.7%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#2	I felt able to negotiate the terms of my last job offer if necessary	No caring responsibility 43.8 % Joint secondary carer 34.3% Sole/Primary carer 32.3%	Disagreed/ Strongly Disagreed
#3	I feel that if I pursue career progression then I am not a good parent/carer	No caring responsibility 18.5 % Joint secondary carer 31.1% Sole/Primary carer 43.1%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#4	I feel greedy asking for a pay increase	No caring responsibility 42.3% Joint secondary carer 37.6% Sole/Primary carer 41.3%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#5	I worry about the consequences of asking for a pay rise and being unsuccessful	No caring responsibility 38.8% Joint secondary carer 31.8% Sole/Primary carer 38.0%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed

Top 5 Barriers by Role Level

#1	I worry about how I come across to others during meetings	Frontline Worker 48.5% Team Lead/Manager 46.8% Director+ 35.0%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#2	I feel greedy asking for a pay increase	Frontline Worker 37.9% Team Lead/Manager 39% Director+ 39.4%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#3	I felt able to negotiate the terms of my last job offer if necessary	Frontline Worker 32.6% Team Lead/Manager 38.2% Director+ 37.1%	Disagreed/ Strongly Disagreed
#4	I feel that if I pursue career progression then I am not a good parent/carer	Frontline Worker 24.1% Team Lead/Manager 37.9% Director+ 26.7%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed
#5	I worry about the consequences of asking for a pay rise and being unsuccessful	Frontline Worker 37.6% Team Lead/Manager 36.8% Director+ 26.8%	Agreed/ Strongly Agreed



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