



Reputation Inc research project



30% Club Ireland

The Courage Dividend

The Business Case For Gender-Balanced Leadership In A Volatile Era

Table of Contents

Introduction: A Note from Our Country Executive	03
Foreword: Sustaining Progress When Conditions Change	04
01 - From Glass Walls to Leadership Advantage	05
02 - The Business Case: Decision Quality as the Primary Dividend	07
03 - Measuring the Impact: From Pay Gap to Pipeline	09
04 - The Courage Dimension: Leadership Under Pressure	11
05 - Recalibration Under External Pressure: From Programme to Principle	13
06 - Barriers That Remain: The Pressure Point in the Middle	15
07 - The Next Two Years: Where Leaders are Focusing	17
Reflections for Leaders: From Commitment to Architecture	18
The Courage Dividend is Earned	19
Methodology	20
About Reputation Inc	21

Introduction:

A Note from our Country Executive

Elizabeth Sheehan, Country Executive, 30% Club Ireland

It is a privilege to write this introduction in my first year as Country Executive of the 30% Club Ireland. I step into the role at a time of real progress and real pressure.

Over the past decade, Ireland's leadership landscape has shifted. Board and executive representation has improved and the language of inclusion is now part of mainstream business thinking. That progress reflects deliberate choices by Chairs and CEOs to lead.

But progress is not permanence.

In a more volatile environment, gender balance can be reframed as an agenda rather than an advantage. This research challenges that thinking.

Leaders are clear. Gender balance is not a compliance exercise or reputational shield. It strengthens decision quality, deepens the leadership pipeline and enhances resilience. The Courage Dividend is tangible. Organisations report stronger performance, improved engagement and better risk management when leadership is balanced.

Yet persistent structural challenges remain. Many leaders observe that women decline progression opportunities more frequently than men. The middle of organisations is a pressure point. Care responsibilities and confidence gaps still shape career decisions. Too often, women are expected to adapt to traditional models of success rather than organisations redesigning work for women's success.

If we are serious about 50:50 workforces and leadership, we must move towards women-centred work design, work that works for women as well as men. That means rethinking progression pathways, sponsorship, flexibility at senior levels and how performance is measured. It means ensuring that ambition and caregiving are not treated as competing identities.

As Country Executive, my focus is on embedding gender balance into the operating fabric of organisations. The 30% Club is voluntary, business-led and grounded in evidence. It supports leaders who recognise that in uncertain times, broader perspectives and stronger pipelines are competitive advantages.

The question now is not whether progress has been made. It is whether we will redesign our workplaces to sustain it.

That is the leadership test before us.



Elizabeth Sheehan

Country Executive,
30% Club Ireland

Foreword:

Sustaining Progress When Conditions Change

Paula Neary, Outgoing Country Chair, 30% Club Ireland

Over the past three years, I have opened our Annual CEO & Chair Conference by reflecting on the context in which we lead. Each year that context has shifted.

We have navigated post pandemic workplaces. We have responded to geopolitical instability. We have seen Executive Orders reshape corporate language and policy. We are now living through AI driven disruption on a scale comparable to an industrial revolution.

In every one of those moments, one truth has remained constant.

Inclusion and gender balance require focus. The minute we take our eye off it, we go backwards.

As I conclude my term as Country Chair, I wanted to ask our CEO and Chair community a different question. Not whether gender balance is the right thing to do, but whether it works.

More than 125 leaders responded. Over four in five believe gender balance is essential or very important to competitiveness. Three quarters report measurable positive business outcomes. Two thirds cite improved decision quality as the strongest dividend. This is not a social initiative. It is a resilience strategy.

When I began my term, I committed to three priorities: *the Basics, Future Skills and Care.*

- **The Basics still matter.** Measurement, reporting and accountability across the employee lifecycle. Progress happens when gender balance is governed like any other strategic priority.
- **Future Skills matter more than ever.** As AI reshapes industries, we must ensure women and men participate equally in the careers that will define our economy.
- **Care remains a structural barrier.** If we do not redesign work to support caring responsibilities for both women and men, we will continue to lose capable leaders at the moment organisations need them most.

A quarter of leaders report that their agenda has less focus or is paused. That is a warning. Yet I have also seen courage. When language shifted, leaders held firm on intent. People watch what we do when it is uncomfortable.

Gender balance is necessary because the world is volatile. The question is not whether it works. It is whether we will continue to choose it.



Paula Neary

Senior Managing Director of
Communications, Media &
Technology at Accenture Ireland
30% Club Ireland

01

From Glass Walls to Leadership Advantage

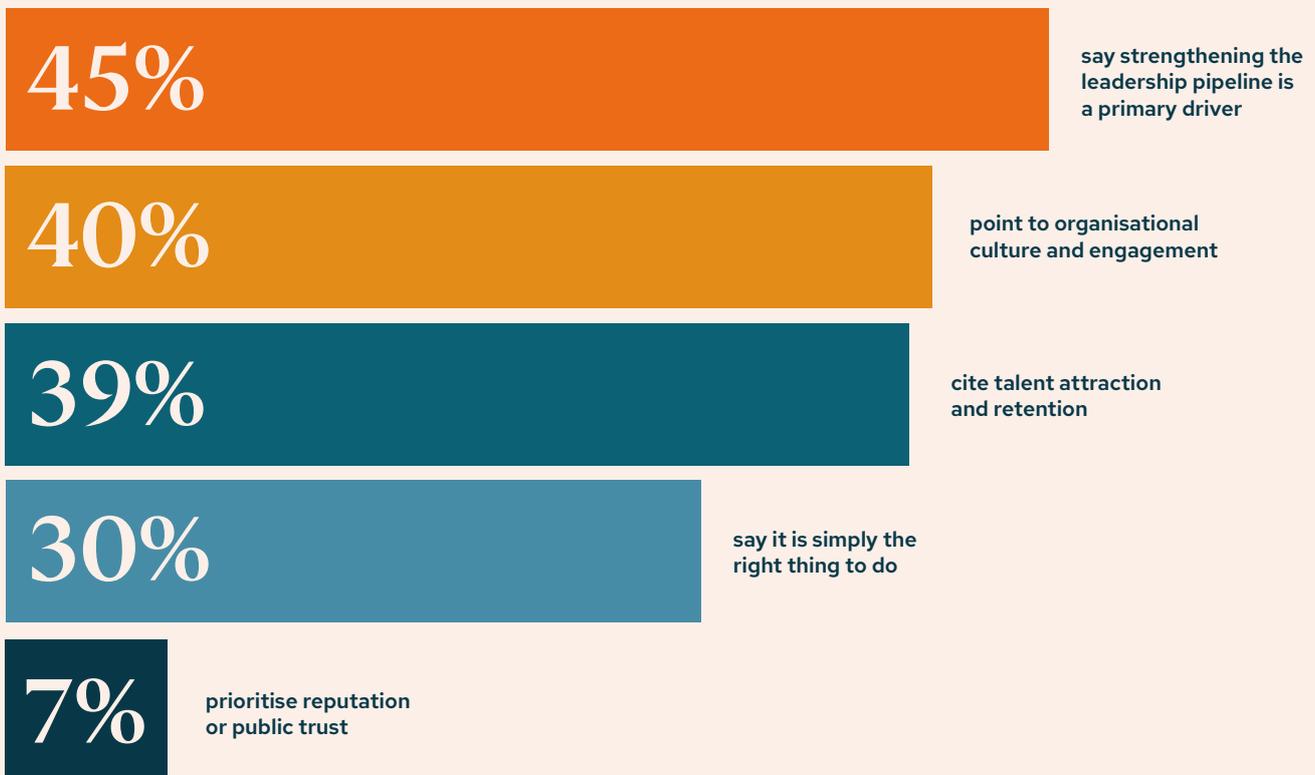
Last year's research examined the hidden architecture of progression inside organisations. It explored the structural glass walls that sit between policy and lived experience, particularly in the middle of organisations where talent pipelines often narrow. This year, the lens shifts from identifying barriers to understanding what happens when leaders address them deliberately.

What CEOs and Chairs are reporting is not symbolic progress. It is operational impact.

When asked what is driving their organisation's focus on gender balance, leaders point overwhelmingly to business fundamentals. The emphasis is on strengthening the system itself: building deeper succession pipelines, widening access to scarce talent, improving engagement and protecting long-term competitiveness. Last year's research examined the hidden architecture of progression inside organisations.

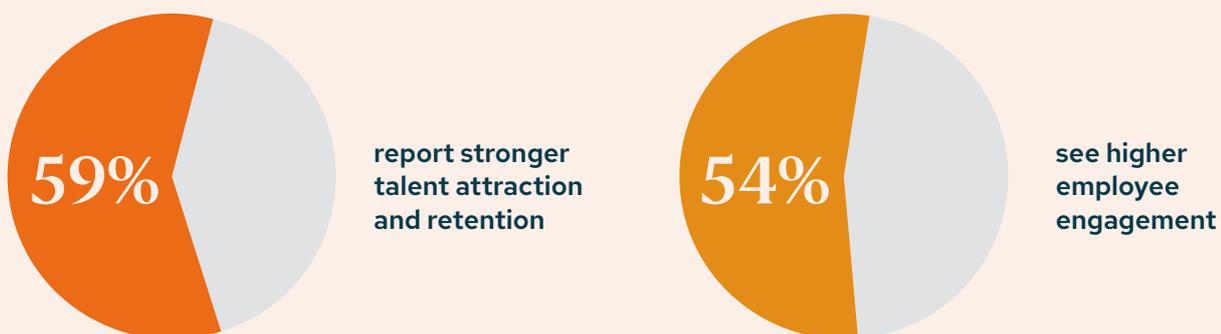
It explored the structural glass walls that sit between policy and lived experience, particularly in the middle of organisations where talent pipelines often narrow. This year, the lens shifts from identifying barriers to understanding what happens when leaders address them deliberately.

What Is Driving Leadership Focus On Gender Equality?



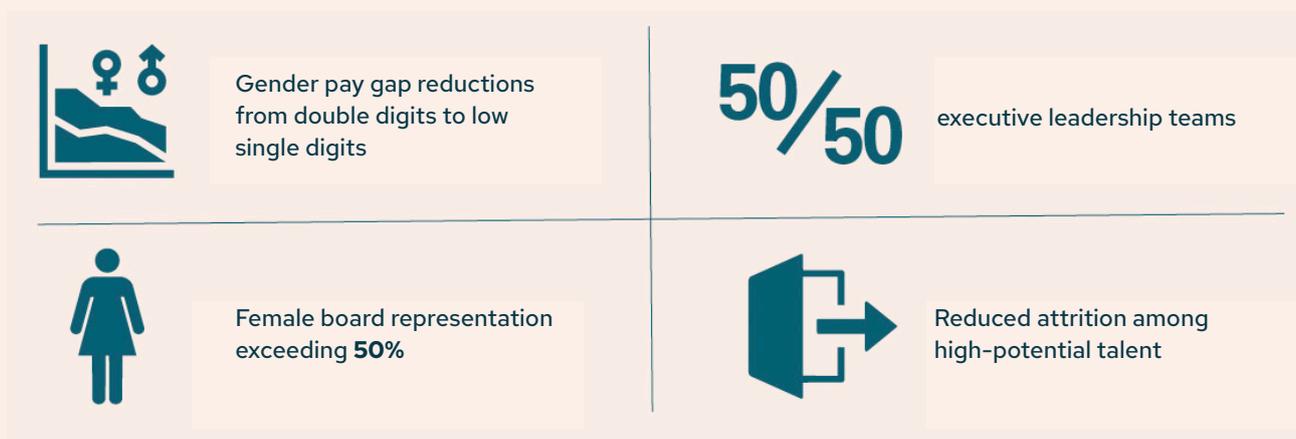
The hierarchy matters. They are doing so because they are seeing internal consequences. Three quarters of respondents report measurable positive outcomes from gender balance efforts. These outcomes are not framed in abstract cultural terms. They are described in the language of performance.

The Measurable Business Dividend



In qualitative responses, leaders describe how balanced executive teams alter the dynamic of decision making. They report more robust challenge at the top table, earlier identification of risk and a broader interpretation of customer needs. Several referenced concrete metrics, including gender pay gap reductions, executive parity and increased female board representation.

Evidence of Structural Impact



Importantly, this is not framed as accidental progress. Leaders consistently emphasise that impact follows measurement. When targets are set, when shortlists are challenged, when succession plans are reviewed through a gender lens, the dial moves.

“By scaling back, you are making a conscious decision to narrow your talent pool and stifle innovation during a period of global volatility.”

The tone of the commentary reflects maturity rather than advocacy. Leaders are not describing gender balance as an initiative to be championed periodically. They are describing it as part of how a resilient organisation functions. This is reinforced by the stability of commitment. Despite geopolitical volatility and evolving public discourse, most leaders report that gender balance has either increased in priority or remained consistent over the past two years.

The glass walls identified in previous research are no longer viewed solely as obstacles to fairness. Leaders are increasingly recognising them as pressure points in the organisational system. When those pressure points are addressed with discipline and accountability, they report that competitive advantage follows.

The implication is clear. Gender balance is no longer being justified. It is being operationalised.

02

The Business Case: Decision Quality as the Primary Dividend

Across all sectors represented in this research, from financial services to professional services, public administration to healthcare, one benefit stands above all others. Leaders report that the strongest dividend of gender-balanced leadership is improved decision quality. This is not a marginal finding. It is the dominant one.

Decision Quality Leads the Dividend

66%

report improved leadership
and decision quality

28%

report enhance organisational
reputation

Over 3 in 5 CEOs and senior leaders identify improved leadership and decision quality as the most significant gain from advancing gender balance. This sits ahead of reputation, innovation and even performance metrics. Leaders are not speaking in abstract cultural terms. They are describing operational shifts in how decisions are made at the top of their organisations.

Several respondents reflected on the difference in executive debate when leadership teams are more balanced. Homogeneous groups, they noted, tend to converge quickly. Diverse groups interrogate assumptions for longer. They introduce alternative frames of reference. They challenge risk assessments more robustly.

“Representation makes for better decision making,
which makes for a better bottom line. It is that simple.”

This emphasis on decision quality is commercially material. Many of the organisations represented in this study operate in sectors facing margin pressure, labour shortages, regulatory scrutiny and rapid technological disruption. In such conditions, the cost of flawed strategic judgement compounds quickly. Leaders describe tangible differences in boardroom dynamics when gender balance improves:

- Risk surfaced earlier
- Customer insight broadened
- Debate deepened rather than diluted
- Assumptions tested more rigorously
- Long-term strategic judgement strengthened

These are not intangible benefits. They are governance capabilities. Beyond decision quality, the link to talent strategy is equally pronounced. **59%** of respondents report stronger talent attraction and retention. In a competitive labour market, leaders are acutely aware that narrowing access to talent is self-imposed disadvantage.

Evidence of Performance Impact

Examples include:

54%

higher employee
engagement

38%

stronger performance
outcomes

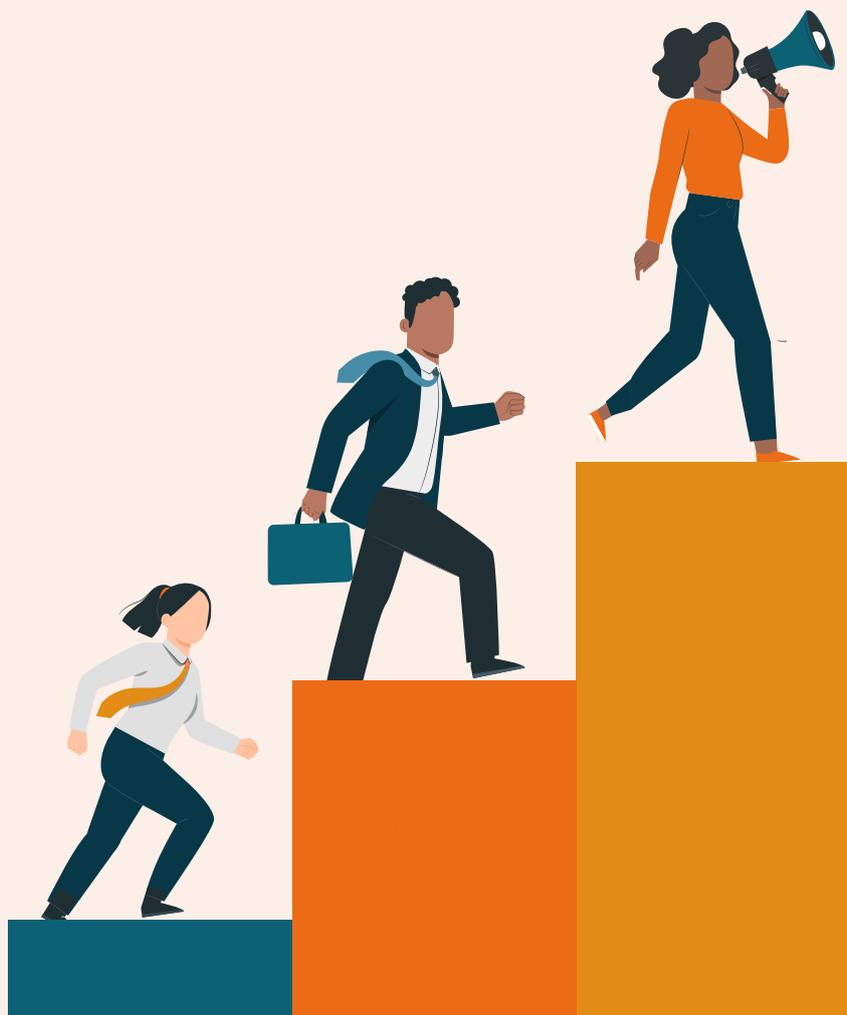
Higher employee
engagement and
stronger performance
outcomes

Several leaders explicitly connected gender-balanced leadership to stronger risk management and crisis responsiveness. **23%** identify better risk management as a direct benefit. Others link broader perspectives to more proactive responses to business challenges and bottom-line improvement.

What emerges clearly from this chapter of the research is that gender balance is increasingly understood not as a moral position but as a performance lever. In volatile environments, narrowing perspective increases exposure. Broadening perspective enhances resilience.

“Homogenous leadership teams make narrower decisions, miss signals from customers and struggle to adapt.”

Leaders are reporting that when gender balance is embedded at executive level, the impact flows outward. It strengthens succession depth and builds organisational confidence in decision making.



03

Measuring the Impact: From Pay Gap to Pipeline

If decision quality is the most frequently cited dividend of gender-balanced leadership, the credibility of that claim rests on measurement. This year's research shows a notable shift. Leaders are not speaking in generalities. They are citing data. Across the 130 organisations represented in this study, CEOs and senior leaders provided concrete examples of measurable progress linked to deliberate action on gender balance. These examples span pay equity, executive representation, board composition, engagement and pipeline development.

Measurable Structural Shifts

Reported examples include:



Gender pay gap
reductions of over

5%

in three years



Executive
teams achieving

50:50

gender parity



Senior leadership
representation
increasing
30% to 50%
female

Female board
representation
exceeding
55%



Female partner
representation
increasing from
**17% to
above 30%**

These are not isolated anecdotes. They are reported outcomes from organisations spanning private, public and semi-state sectors. In several cases, leaders describe how executive parity acted as a catalyst rather than a conclusion. Achieving 50:50 at the top table created visible role models, which in turn improved attraction of senior female talent.

One organisation noted that moving to a gender-balanced executive team *“played a key factor in enabling us to attract talented females into senior leadership positions across the UK and Ireland.”* Another reported that once a female executive was appointed, it *“unlocked more contributions from existing female employees and board members.”*

The pipeline effect is evident. As representation at executive level increases, so too does confidence in progression pathways further down the organisation. Importantly, leaders are linking these structural shifts to broader organisational outcomes. This is not presented as correlation alone. It is framed as cause and effect.

Several leaders emphasised that progress accelerated once gender balance was embedded into governance mechanisms. What gets measured, gets done. Robust management information on promotions and pay. Transparent reporting on gender pay gap. Balanced shortlists mandated before recruitment processes could close. DEI metrics incorporated into executive performance measures.

“Data. Reporting on actions and activities is the single most effective action that holds the organisation to account.”

It suggests that gender balance has moved from being viewed as a parallel agenda to being recognised as part of core organisational architecture.

When pay gaps narrow, pipelines widen and executive teams reach parity, leaders are reporting more than improved optics. They are describing strengthened succession depth, more credible governance and enhanced organisational trust.

The measurement itself becomes a signal. It communicates seriousness of intent internally and externally. It reassures talent that progression is possible. It signals to investors and stakeholders that leadership is attentive to risk and performance fundamentals.

The more strategic question for Chairs and CEOs is whether they are measuring the right indicators, and whether they are willing to act on what those indicators reveal. When structural barriers are addressed with rigour, commercial outcomes follow. And when CEOs own that link explicitly, progress accelerates.



04

The Courage Dimension: Leadership Under Pressure

Progress on gender balance does not occur by accident. It occurs because leaders decide that it will. This year's research reveals that for many CEOs and senior leaders, advancing gender-balanced leadership has not been a neutral or frictionless process. It has required conviction.

“When the pressure is on, the instinct can be to retreat to what feels familiar. Familiarity is not strength.”

63%

of respondents say that advancing gender balance required courage to some or great extent within their organisation. That figure alone signals that this work is not universally comfortable, nor universally uncontested.

What Does Courage Mean in this Context?

It does not mean grand gestures or public positioning. It means specific, often difficult decisions taken within governance processes, recruitment rooms and executive discussions.

Leaders describe courage in action as:



Refusing to accept male-only shortlists and insisting that recruitment processes remain open until balanced candidates are presented



Mandating gender-balanced interview panels and promotion slates



Setting explicit 50:50 targets at executive or partnership level and reporting transparently on progress



Publicly disclosing gender pay gap data and committing to close it



Challenging senior colleagues when decision making appears biased or uneven



Promoting women during maternity leave to avoid penalising a life stage



Reframing performance models that disadvantage flexible or non-linear career paths

Several leaders reflected on the discomfort inherent in these actions. One described confronting *“hard truths openly with my leadership team – especially where gender balance wasn’t where it needed to be.”* Another noted that it would have been easier *“to avoid discomfort”* but chose instead to *“name the gaps, own them and lead through them.”*

The lessons leaders report from this recalibration are instructive. Several observed that without dedicated focus, progress slows. Others concluded that embedding accountability into core leadership processes, rather than isolating it within a single function, created greater long-term resilience.

For other leaders, courage was less about external scrutiny and more about internal complacency. In organisations where representation had improved at entry level or mid-management, it was tempting to assume that the problem had been solved. Yet several respondents acknowledged that the most significant drop-off remains in the middle of organisations, particularly at the point where caregiving pressures intensify.

“Do not confuse caution with competence. Doubling down on gender balance is not an act of ideology. It is an act of leadership.”

This framing is important. Courage, in this context, is not activism. It is disciplined leadership. It is the willingness to confront uncomfortable data, to challenge long-standing norms and to accept short-term friction in pursuit of long-term resilience.

It also requires consistency. Several leaders emphasised that courage is often found in a series of small decisions rather than one defining moment. Insisting on balanced panels. Questioning pay outcomes. Sponsoring female talent proactively. Holding oneself accountable in executive scorecards.

The cumulative impact of these decisions is structural.

If the earlier chapters establish that gender balance strengthens decision quality and commercial performance, this chapter makes clear that achieving those outcomes requires active leadership. It requires Chairs and CEOs to resist drift, to defend progress when narratives shift and to ensure that ambition does not soften under pressure. The strategic implication is clear. The dividend does not materialise automatically. It accrues to those who are prepared to lead deliberately.



05

Recalibration Under External Pressure: From Programme to Principle

The operating environment for organisations has shifted materially over the past two years. Geopolitical tensions, regulatory developments, public discourse and changes in global corporate policy have all influenced how diversity, equity and inclusion are framed and communicated.

This research confirms that organisations in Ireland have not been immune to those pressures.

Integration as a Resilience Strategy



A quarter of respondents report that they have recalibrated or adjusted aspects of their DEI strategy in response to external factors. For some, recalibration meant moderating language to ensure compliance with evolving regulatory expectations or global directives. For others, it meant consolidating budgets or dissolving stand-alone DEI roles. In some cases, responsibility was redistributed across HR, strategy or executive leadership functions.

The tone of qualitative commentary suggests that these shifts were rarely undertaken lightly. Leaders describe navigating tension between global parent company mandates and local commitments. Others referenced “legal and reputational caution” shaping the boundaries of activity.

Yet what emerges most clearly from the data is not retreat, but adaptation.

Several leaders observed that embedding responsibility for gender balance more directly into executive accountability strengthened ownership. Without a dedicated team to “carry” the agenda, leadership teams were required to integrate gender balance considerations into succession planning, performance management and compensation cycles.



“Without dedicated resources, you have to make sure DEI is built into all your processes and procedures to sustainably embed it. If done correctly, this is a long-term better answer.”

This theme recurs across responses. When gender balance is positioned as a stand-alone programme, it is vulnerable to budget cycles, leadership changes or shifting external narratives. When it is embedded into governance architecture, it is more durable.

While **23%** recalibrated aspects of their strategy, three quarters did not. Most leaders continue to frame gender balance as strategically important, and an overwhelming majority see it as integral to resilience and competitiveness going forward.

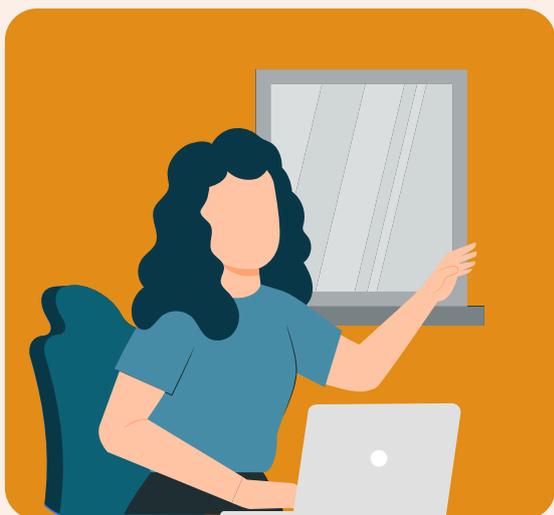
The recalibration, therefore, appears less about abandonment and more about structural realignment. Several leaders highlighted that integrating gender balance metrics into overall company performance metrics strengthened seriousness. Others referenced tighter governance around compensation and promotion decisions, supported by robust management information split by gender.

When gender balance is siloed, it can be perceived as discretionary. When it is embedded in executive scorecards, succession planning and pay review processes, it becomes structural. The shift from programme to principle appears to be more sustainable.

This does not diminish the importance of visible advocacy or specialist expertise. Rather, it suggests that long-term resilience requires gender balance to be owned collectively by the leadership team, not delegated.

The strategic implication for Chairs and CEOs is clear. External conditions may fluctuate. Language may evolve. Budget lines may tighten. But if gender balance is truly understood as a lever of decision quality, pipeline strength and risk management, it cannot remain peripheral. The organisations that endure pressure most effectively are those that have moved from initiative to infrastructure.

“A lot can be achieved without dedicated roles or budgets. Progress requires commitment from the top leadership team and at all levels.”



06

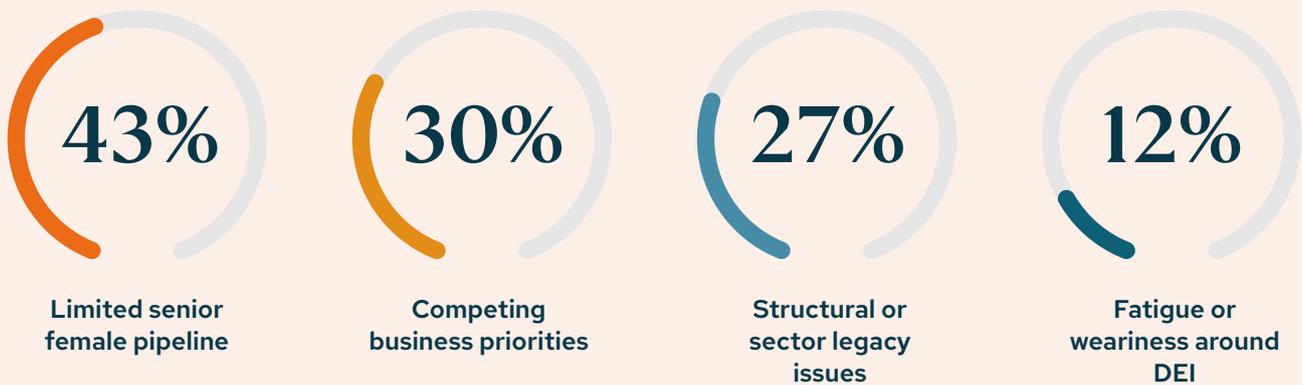
Barriers That Remain: The Pressure Point in the Middle

The data in this report points to measurable progress. Executive teams are achieving parity. Pay gaps are narrowing. Decision quality is strengthening. Yet leaders are clear that progress is neither uniform nor complete.

Structural tensions persist.

When asked to identify the most significant barriers to advancing gender balance, respondents point not to ideology or resistance, but to capacity and pipeline constraints.

The Barriers Leaders Identify



The most frequently cited barrier is a limited senior female pipeline. This finding is particularly striking given the progress at board and executive level reported elsewhere in this study. It suggests that while representation at the top has improved, the depth of succession beneath it remains uneven.

“We lose strong talent in the middle because the model of leadership has not evolved fast enough.”

Leaders describe a recurring pattern. Graduate intakes are often gender balanced. Early career progression is strong. Boards are increasingly diverse. Yet somewhere in the middle of organisations, representation narrows.

Several respondents referred to this as *“the squeeze point”* or *“the mid-career cliff”*. It is the stage where professional ambition intersects most sharply with caregiving responsibilities, life stage decisions and evolving expectations of leadership.

This dynamic is reflected in another important data point.

Leadership Opportunities Declined

45%

observe women declining leadership opportunities more frequently than men

Nearly half of leaders report that women are declining promotion or leadership opportunities at a higher rate than their male counterparts. The reasons cited are consistent across sectors.

Respondents identify:

- Caregiving responsibilities, including childcare and eldercare
- Confidence gaps or lower propensity to self-nominate
- Perceived trade-offs between senior leadership and work-life balance
- Social expectations around availability and visibility
- Lack of visible role models at higher levels

“The pipeline challenge is not about entry. It is about *sustainability*.”

The connection to the Care Economics theme explored in previous research is evident. While organisations have invested in policies, flexibility and hybrid working models, leaders acknowledge that structural expectations of senior roles often remain unchanged. Long hours, constant availability and narrow definitions of commitment can disproportionately deter those with caregiving responsibilities.

This is not solely a women’s issue. Several leaders emphasised the importance of normalising flexibility and caregiving for men as well. However, the data suggests that the impact remains uneven.

Competing business priorities also emerge as a significant barrier. In volatile markets, leadership attention is finite. Margin pressure, regulatory change, digital transformation and workforce restructuring can crowd out longer-term pipeline work. The risk, as several respondents observed, is that momentum slows not because of opposition, but because of distraction.

Fatigue or weariness around DEI, cited by **12%** of respondents, is a smaller but notable factor. Some leaders describe a sense of saturation in language or initiative. Others suggest that polarised public discourse can make internal conversations more complex.

Yet even within this context, most respondents continue to affirm the importance of gender balance. The barrier, therefore, is less about belief and more about structural follow-through.

If the mid-career stage is the critical pressure point, then interventions must concentrate there. Sponsorship programmes, flexible career pathways, visible role modelling and explicit succession planning at middle management level become essential.

Balanced graduate intakes are not sufficient. Diverse boards are not sufficient. Without depth in the middle, representation at the top remains fragile.

The data suggests that the next phase of progress will not be driven primarily by headline targets. It will be driven by redesigning the systems that determine who sustains a leadership trajectory over time.

07

The Next Two Years: Where Leaders Are Focusing

If the earlier chapters establish what has been achieved and where pressure points remain, the next question is forward-looking: where will leaders concentrate their effort over the coming two years?

The data suggests that the focus is becoming more structural and more precise.

Leaders are not signalling a retreat. They are signalling recalibration towards the areas of greatest long-term leverage.

Priority Areas for the Next Two Years

84%

believe gender balance will be essential or very important to organisational resilience and competitiveness

Leadership identify focus on:

- Mid-level leadership development
- Board and executive succession planning
- Retention and progression
- Measurement and reporting
- Flexible working and caregiving supports

“If we do not build depth in the middle of the organisation, parity at the top will not hold.”

Board and executive succession planning also features prominently. Several respondents noted that parity at the top cannot be sustained without disciplined review of who is being prepared, sponsored and stretched for future leadership.

Retention and progression are increasingly understood as interconnected. It is not enough to recruit diverse talent. Organisations must create conditions under which that talent can progress sustainably.

Measurement and reporting continue to be cited as foundational. Leaders repeatedly emphasise that transparency around pay, promotion velocity and succession depth drives accountability. Without consistent metrics, ambition diffuses.

Flexible working and caregiving supports feature prominently in forward plans, reinforcing the structural nature of the pipeline challenge. Leaders acknowledge that if leadership models do not evolve to accommodate life-stage realities, the organisation will continue to lose capability at critical junctures.

The forward-looking tone of the data is important. The majority of leaders believe gender balance will be essential or very important to resilience and competitiveness in the coming years. This is not framed as reputational necessity. It is framed as strategic hedging in uncertain conditions.

The implication is clear.

The next phase of progress will not be driven primarily by public targets. It will be driven by internal system design. And in that system design lies the next Courage Dividend.

Reflections for Leaders: From Commitment to Architecture

The evidence in this report is clear. Gender-balanced leadership strengthens decision quality, deepens pipelines and enhances resilience. Yet the data also shows that progress is not self-sustaining. It depends on structural discipline and leadership conviction.

In light of the findings across decision quality, measurement, courage and pipeline risk, Chairs and CEOs may wish to reflect on the following:

Is gender balance embedded in the architecture of succession planning, or reported as a headline metric after the fact?

Representation at the top is visible. The health of the pipeline beneath it is the true test of sustainability.

Are we interrogating our recruitment and promotion processes with the same rigour we apply to financial performance?

Do we challenge homogenous shortlists consistently, or only when it is convenient?

Where is the real pressure point in our organisation?

Are we measuring progression at mid-career stages, where the data shows the pipeline most often narrows?

Have we redesigned senior roles to reflect modern expectations of leadership, or are we still rewarding availability over impact?

Do our performance models enable sustainability, or unintentionally penalise flexibility?

Is accountability for gender balance collective at executive level, or functionally delegated?

When budgets tighten or language evolves, does responsibility diffuse or strengthen?

Are we measuring what matters?

Do we track pay equity, promotion velocity, succession depth and retention of high-potential talent with the same transparency we apply to other risk indicators?

When external pressure increases, does our commitment embed further or soften?

Does a shift in terminology reflect strategic maturity, or quiet retreat?

The strategic positioning emerging from this research is clear.

Gender balance cannot remain an initiative that sits alongside core business strategy. It must be embedded within governance, succession, performance management and risk oversight. The question for leaders is not whether they support gender balance in principle. It is whether their systems, behaviours and incentives make that support structural.

The Courage Dividend Is Earned

The evidence in this report leaves little ambiguity. Gender-balanced leadership strengthens decision quality, sharpens risk management, deepens succession pipelines and enhances long-term competitiveness. These are not abstract ideals. They are measurable outcomes reported directly by CEOs and Chairs.

The question is no longer whether gender balance delivers value.

The more consequential question is whether leadership commitment is conditional or structural. Conditional commitment shifts with headlines, external pressure and budget cycles. It softens when language evolves or scrutiny intensifies. It treats gender balance as a metric to review rather than a system to build.

Structural commitment is different. It is embedded in how the organisation operates. It shapes succession planning, promotion criteria and performance management. It is visible in pay transparency, in the composition of shortlists and in the depth of mid-career pipelines. It is owned collectively by the executive team, not delegated to a single function.

Structural commitment means:

- Embedding gender balance into succession planning and talent reviews as a core decision criterion
- Measuring mid-career progression with the same rigour applied to board composition
- Challenging homogenous shortlists and promotion patterns consistently
- Designing leadership models that enable sustainability rather than reward constant availability
- Making pay equity transparent and accountable
- Ensuring responsibility sits squarely with the executive leadership team
- Above all, it requires consistency.

The dividend described throughout this report does not accrue to those who declare ambition. It accrues to those who operationalise it. It is realised through the daily disciplines of governance, the willingness to confront uncomfortable data and the resolve to sustain focus when competing priorities intensify.

In volatile conditions, organisations face a choice. They narrow to familiarity or they strengthen through broader perspective. They treat gender balance as peripheral, or they recognise it as part of the architecture that determines how well they think, adapt and lead.

The Courage Dividend is earned when commitment becomes infrastructure. When measurement drives action. When leadership remains steady under pressure.

And it compounds over time.

Methodology

This report has been authored and analysed by **Reputation Inc**, the 30% Club Ireland's research and insights partner, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative input from senior business leaders across Ireland.

The study is based on responses from **130 CEOs, Chairs and senior executives** representing organisations across financial services, professional services, public administration, healthcare, technology and other key sectors of the Irish economy.

Approximately **70% of respondents represent the private sector**, with the remainder spanning public, semi-state and not-for-profit organisations. Company size is broadly distributed, from SMEs to multinational organisations employing more than 5,000 people, ensuring a balanced cross-section of leadership perspectives.

The research instrument was designed to assess both sentiment and structural practice. It examined:

- The current strategic priority assigned to gender balance
- Observed commercial and organisational outcomes
- Measurable impact including pay gap, representation and engagement shifts
- Barriers to progression across the talent pipeline
- Leadership decisions and trade-offs under external pressure
- Areas of focus for the next two years

The methodology integrates statistical analysis with anonymised verbatim commentary from participating leaders. This approach allows the report to capture not only what organisations are doing, but how leaders are interpreting risk, resilience and competitive advantage in real time.

The research builds on the foundation established in last year's Care Economics report, which combined large-scale employee and employer input to examine structural pressures within modern organisations. While the 2025 Care study focused on workforce experience and systemic barriers, this 2026 report centres explicitly on the perspective of Chairs and CEOs, examining how those structural insights translate into board-level decision making.

Together, the two studies provide a layered view of organisational change: from lived employee experience to executive governance and commercial impact.

All responses were treated confidentially and reported in aggregate form to encourage candour and strategic reflection among senior leaders.

Methodological Note

A total of **130 online responses** were collected by Reputation Inc between December 2025 and February 2026 via an anonymous survey link.

Percentages **may not sum to 100%** due to rounding.

* For questions where respondents could select more than one option, percentages represent the proportion of respondents selecting each option and therefore **may exceed 100%**.

About Reputation Inc

Reputation Inc is a strategic advisory and stakeholder intelligence consultancy working with senior leadership teams across Ireland and internationally.

The firm specialises in translating stakeholder insight into board-level decision support. Through structured research, high-touch executive interviews and strategic advisory engagement, Reputation Inc helps organisations understand how they are perceived, where risk and opportunity sit and how leadership choices shape long-term resilience.

Reputation Inc works primarily with CEOs, Boards and senior leaders across sectors including financial services, professional services, technology, healthcare, retail and public administration. Its approach combines rigorous qualitative research with commercial analysis, ensuring that insight informs governance, succession planning, risk management and organisational strategy.

As research partner to the 30% Club Ireland, Reputation Inc has authored and analysed this year's Courage Dividend report. The firm also led last year's Care Economics research, bringing together large-scale workforce insight and employer perspective to examine structural pressures shaping modern organisations.

Across both studies, the focus remains consistent: ensuring that stakeholder voice, leadership accountability and measurable impact are central to decision making.

In an era of volatility and accelerating change, Reputation Inc believes that resilient organisations are built not only on financial capital, but on insight, perspective and disciplined leadership.

