



RISE Project: *Insights Report*

DCO Diversity
Council
Australia

SSI For equality
of life.

CEW
Women Leaders Empowering All Women



Acknowledgments

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Participating organisations

Accenture Australia Pty Ltd	Jesuit Social Services
ACON Health Limited	Navitas Pty Ltd
Anglicare Victoria	Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG)
ANU College of Systems and Society	Russell Kennedy
Arup	Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre Ltd
Aurecon	Telstra
Australian Financial Complaints Authority (AFCA)	The Star Entertainment Group
BHP	Uniting NSW.ACT
Crown Resorts	University of Sydney
Deloitte	University of Technology Sydney
EnergyAustralia	Westpac Group
Gilbert + Tobin	Woolworths Group
HCF – Hospital Contributions Fund of Australia	

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Message from the CEOs

Catherine Hunter, CEO,
Diversity Council Australia

Diversity Council Australia (DCA) is proud to be part of the RISE consortium and contribute to a project that places the experiences, voices and leadership of culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) women at the centre of organisational change.

The RISE Project reflects our shared belief that building equitable leadership pathways requires data, collaboration and a sustained focus on addressing the structural barriers that shape who is seen, supported and selected for leadership.

This report offers valuable early insights from that work, and highlights both the opportunity ahead and the complexity of creating lasting change. What stands out is that real progress depends on more than intention alone. It calls for organisations to centre the voices of CARM women, prioritise racial safety, engage in honest self-reflection and move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to leadership.

We thank our consortium partners, as well as the 25 organisations that participated in this groundbreaking project, and all the women who have contributed their knowledge, courage and leadership to this work. Their insights continue to challenge, inform and strengthen our collective efforts to build more equitable and inclusive workplaces across Australia.

Violet Roumeliotis, CEO,
Settlement Services International

I am very proud of the RISE program and its outstanding achievements. What began as a shared vision has grown into a strong consortium, working alongside 25 companies and 360 women to support the careers of culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) women.

The SSI RISE Team delivered an intensive and thoughtful participant support model, helping participants develop a growth mindset, staying grounded and embracing their CARM identity, rather than feeling the need to code switch or conform to expected norms.

I remain deeply committed to the advancement of CARM women. I wish all participants continued growth and every success on their new pathways.

Lisa Annese, CEO,
Chief Executive Women

Chief Executive Women works to build a more gender equal Australia, and with it a more productive, resilient and prosperous one. Women's leadership is central to that work, because when women lead, the organisations they run perform better and the economy they shape is stronger. Culturally and racially marginalised women are among the most capable and ambitious leaders this country has.

Through RISE, CEW set out to prove a case we now make without hesitation: leadership development that is genuinely inclusive of culture and race is not an optional refinement, it is a condition of building leadership in this country that reflects the country itself. The lesson for other organisations is straightforward. Progress measured in averages will keep concealing how rarely CARM women reach the top, and that changes only when leadership development is built to recognise the leaders these women already are.

My thanks go to our consortium partners, and to the women who shared their insight, experience and ambition with RISE. The work of building a more gender equal Australia, and a more prosperous one, continues, and we invite you to take it up with us.

A note on language: key terms in this report

CARM or culturally and racially

marginalised refers to people who are not white – research shows this group experiences racial marginalisation. It includes people who are Black, Brown, Asian or any other non-white group who face marginalisation due to their race. The term “culturally” appears because these people may also face discrimination due to their culture or background – e.g. a woman who is a Muslim migrant from South Sudan may face discrimination because of her race, religion and cultural background.

The RISE project was designed for **CARM women**. We included cis women, trans women, non-binary people and gender diverse people who identify (or are identified by others) as CARM and, importantly, who experience gendered racism.

Gendered racism² refers to marginalisation due to the inseparable operation of sexism (gender) and racism (race). This can include harmful stereotypes such as “oppressed Muslim woman” or “angry black woman”.

CARM women in middle management

typically refers to those up to four levels below the chief executive officer (CEO-4). However, given the lack of CARM women at this level of leadership in Australian organisations, lower levels of management were included in this project if the organisation did not have, or could not, recruit 15 CARM women middle managers.

Centring voice refers to the process of prioritising, elevating and acting on what people with lived experiences are telling us. Any organisational change initiatives that aim to address the systemic barriers CARM women face in organisations need to centre CARM women’s voices. This is because CARM women understand the compounding effects of experiencing both sex and race discrimination (i.e. gendered racism) in ways that non-CARM women and men and CARM men cannot.¹

Intersectionality³ refers to how different aspects of a person's identity expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination that greatly increase their marginalisation. The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how systems of inequity (in this case, sexism and racism) operate together, rather than separately, to compound marginalisation. While the term was coined by Crenshaw, the underlying thinking and arguments have long been articulated through Black feminist thought, dating back to figures such as Sojourner Truth, who challenged single-lens understandings of "woman". This body of thought is therefore rooted in the lived experiences and theorising of Black women, it established a foundational insight that would later become central to the concept of intersectionality: that race, gender, and other systems of power do not operate separately, but simultaneously, shaping and amplifying who gets seen, who gets heard, and who gets left behind.

Lived experience⁴ refers to embodied forms of knowledge and insights generated through an individual's direct and ongoing encounters with social (and organisational) structures and systems of power that marginalise, dominate and discriminate against them. Importantly, the term is specifically concerned with the forms of knowledge produced through experiences of unequal power relations. Prioritising lived experience is an equity practice to ensure that the voices of those most marginalised inform the organisational policies, programs and interventions that intend to address the structural inequities that marginalise them. People who are historically **marginalised** have less access to opportunities, resources, leadership and decision-making (less power) due to their age, class, disability, gender, race or other attribute associated with different levels of privilege and exclusion.

Marginalisation⁵ is not inherent to a person or due to anything a person has done or not done. It is due to power imbalances in systems of inequity like racism, sexism and so on. Dominant groups (i.e. those who are not marginalised) set the rules, control the resources and determine who gets a seat at the table to make important decisions.

Remember that people can be privileged but still have some experience of marginalisation. For example:

- White men with disability experience privilege because of their gender and their race, but they are marginalised because of their disability.
- Heterosexual white women experience privilege because of their race and sexuality, but they are marginalised because of their gender.

Race⁶ is a social construct rather than a biological one.⁷ The idea of race emerged during European colonisation of nations. Here, race was used to categorise people into a social hierarchy based on arbitrary criteria such as their skin colour, hair texture or facial features. Peoples deemed to be non-white were treated as “different”, “outside the norm” and inferior to peoples judged to be white. Science now tells us that race is a very poor proxy for human variation.⁸ Physical characteristics used to identify racial groups vary with geography – they do not correspond to underlying biological traits.⁹ Genetic research shows that humans cannot be divided into biologically distinct subcategories.¹⁰ Moreover, vast migrations and mixing of peoples over thousands of years have meant that, today, differences within any one supposed race are often far greater than differences between races.¹¹ While race may not be “real” biologically, it remains important.

We use the terms **racialised** (e.g. workers racialised as Black or as white), **racially privileged** and **racially marginalised**¹² instead of “culturally diverse” or “culturally and linguistically diverse”. These terms recognise that racism is rooted in a social process called racialisation. This is where some groups come to be viewed as different, outside the norm and inferior due to their race, ethnicity, language or religion, and they receive unequal treatment. It creates a society in which some groups are racially privileged, while others are racially marginalised. Racialisation happens in response to people’s arbitrary physical characteristics (e.g. skin colour, hair texture, facial features), as well as accent, language, name, religion and clothing.

Racism¹³ is when an individual or organisation with race-based societal power discriminates, excludes or disadvantages a racially marginalised person because of their race, colour, descent, nationality, ethnicity, religion or immigrant status. Racism can be unconscious or conscious, active or passive, obvious or subtle. Specifically, there is **interpersonal racism**, which is individuals’ beliefs, attitudes and actions that discriminate, exclude or disadvantage people from racially marginalised groups. There is also **systemic racism**, which is embodied in organisational policies, procedures and practices that directly or indirectly discriminate, exclude or disadvantage people from racially marginalised groups.

Racial literacy is the ability to understand what systemic racism is and how it operates in society so we can effectively address it. We need high racial literacy as this helps us understand CARM women’s unique experiences of discrimination due to their race and gender. Without this racial literacy, we cannot create more inclusive workplaces for CARM women.

Racial safety for CARM women in the workplace means creating environments where they feel respected and that their racial identity is not used to exclude, marginalise or harass them, so they can progress into leadership.

Executive summary

We know that culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) women in Australian workplaces are ambitious, capable and resilient. Yet research has shown that they experience a range of entrenched systemic barriers that prevent them from reaching senior leadership.

Realise. Inspire. Support. Energise. (RISE) was a groundbreaking project by Diversity Council Australia (DCA), Settlement Services International (SSI) and Chief Executive Women (CEW). It aimed to break down systemic barriers and provide direct pathways for CARM women to reach senior leadership positions within Australian organisations.

This report presents our initial thoughts on RISE, capturing what has been implemented, what has been learned and what is beginning to shift for those who participated.

Given that RISE is about gendered racism (i.e. intersectionality), it required us to work at two levels at once. As such, the project was built on a macro (organisational/systemic focus) and micro (individual) framework.

At the macro level, the **organisational pathway** supported participating organisations to centre the voices of CARM women, identify systemic barriers, and design targeted change interventions, anchored by DCA's ASSESS to RISE diagnostic tool.

At the micro level, **the participant pathway** met CARM women where they were at, combining universally accessible offerings (networking, strengths profiles, career advancement planning) with individually tailored support, including mentoring and coaching and a culturally inclusive adaptation of the CEW Leaders Program.

These two levels or pathways were not parallel but interdependent: organisational change without individual support, or individual development without structural change, would each have been insufficient. That integration **is** the model.

This report explores insights within five key themes:

- Designing for intersectionality
- Methodological insights
- Systemic barriers and enablers
- Designing for CARM women
- What works

Through this report, we have attempted to capture how organisations engage with the process of eliminating gendered racism in practice, providing practical insights into what it takes to move from intent to implementation.

The report also identifies the unanticipated challenges and tensions that emerged for us during the project. By making these dynamics visible, the report offers a more realistic account of organisational change when it comes to addressing gendered racism.

Although not a comprehensive guide to addressing gendered racism or CARM women's representation in leadership, this report outlines the approach taken by the RISE project, and some of the insights and enablers that were found along the way.

RISE *at a glance*

Community of Practice sessions

Builds practitioner capability

Enables peer sharing

Development of action plan using the Centring Marginalised Voices framework

Includes commitment to sponsoring CARM women's career development

Implementation of action plan

Implementation of initiatives, trainings, and change interventions

Supporting participant recommendations

Deployment of the ASSESS to RISE organisational diagnostic tool

Identifies systemic barriers in the workplace

Data driven insights – report and briefing

Formation of a project team

Leads and drives implementation

Organisational Pathway



Learning opportunities

Targeted networking events every six weeks

Ad hoc support e.g. for job interviews or performance appraisals

Implementation of career development activities

Networking events

Mentoring and coaching

Development of support through sponsorship

Development of career advancement plan

Completion of strengths profile and debrief

Identification of career goals and support activities required

Onboarding process

Onboarding survey

Completion of the ASSESS to RISE Organisational Diagnostic Tool

1:1 conversation to understand where participants were at

Participant Pathway

About RISE



What was the RISE project?

Realise. Inspire. Support. Energise. (RISE) was a project for culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) women in Australia. It sought to break down systemic barriers and provide direct pathways so they could reach senior leadership positions within Australian organisations.

Organisations collaborated to break down barriers for CARM women

RISE was a partnership between Diversity Council Australia (DCA), Settlement Services International (SSI) and Chief Executive Women (CEW). For more on the consortium partnership, see Appendix 1.

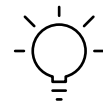
We applied a dual-streamed framework, innovatively working at the systemic level and the individual level concurrently with:

25

organisations, which had support to identify, design and deliver effective change interventions on our **organisational pathway**

360

CARM women in middle management at those organisations, who were supported in their leadership journeys based on needs they identified themselves, following our **participant pathway**.



See *RISE at a glance* and the appendices for more information on these dual pathways.

RISE has had a direct benefit to the 360 CARM women involved. *But as the project targeted systemic change,* we are aware of a wider positive impact for CARM women beyond those participating.

About RISE

RISE focused on six program elements to create change

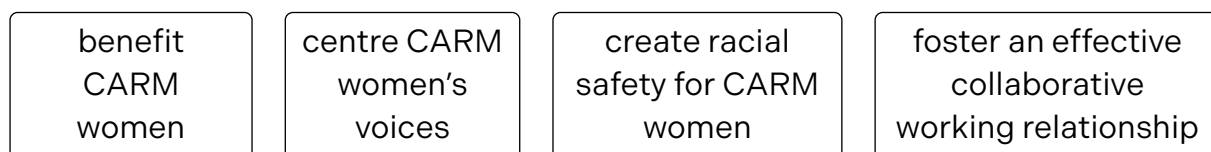
Through RISE, the 25 participating organisations gained access to six change elements. Each element targeted change in the organisation but also built the leadership capabilities of CARM women middle managers. Although the RISE project has now ended, we expect these change elements to remain available to organisations:



Self-determination was at the project's heart

RISE was fundamentally a self-determination project, anchored in principles that ensured CARM women were not simply passive participants. Instead, they were central to the work – knowledge holders, contributors to analyses, decision-makers and drivers of organisational change.

This was our commitment – that the project would:



This commitment shaped both the design and the delivery of the project, grounding it in principles that prioritised agency, voice and structural impact.

Why was RISE so important?

Research has shown us that CARM women face systemic barriers to career advancement, and the state of play has not improved in recent years. RISE went beyond a “single lens, gender only” approach and built in intersectionality to support workplace inclusion.

Systemic barriers for CARM women are entrenched and unyielding

In 2017, DCA's Capitalising on Culture and Gender in ASX Leadership research found that only 1.5% of all ASX senior executives are culturally diverse women (defined as women from any cultural origin other than Anglo or North-West European).¹⁴

The same year, DCA's Cracking the Glass Cultural Ceiling research showed how women from non-Anglo cultural origins are at a double disadvantage in Australian workplaces. Their gender and culture combine to make it more difficult than their male counterparts or than women from Anglo cultural origins to access leadership roles.¹⁵

Six years on, in 2023, DCA's Culturally and Racially Marginalised Women in Leadership research found that the state of play for CARM women in Australia is largely unchanged.¹⁶ CARM women in leadership are few and far between as systemic barriers remain in place.

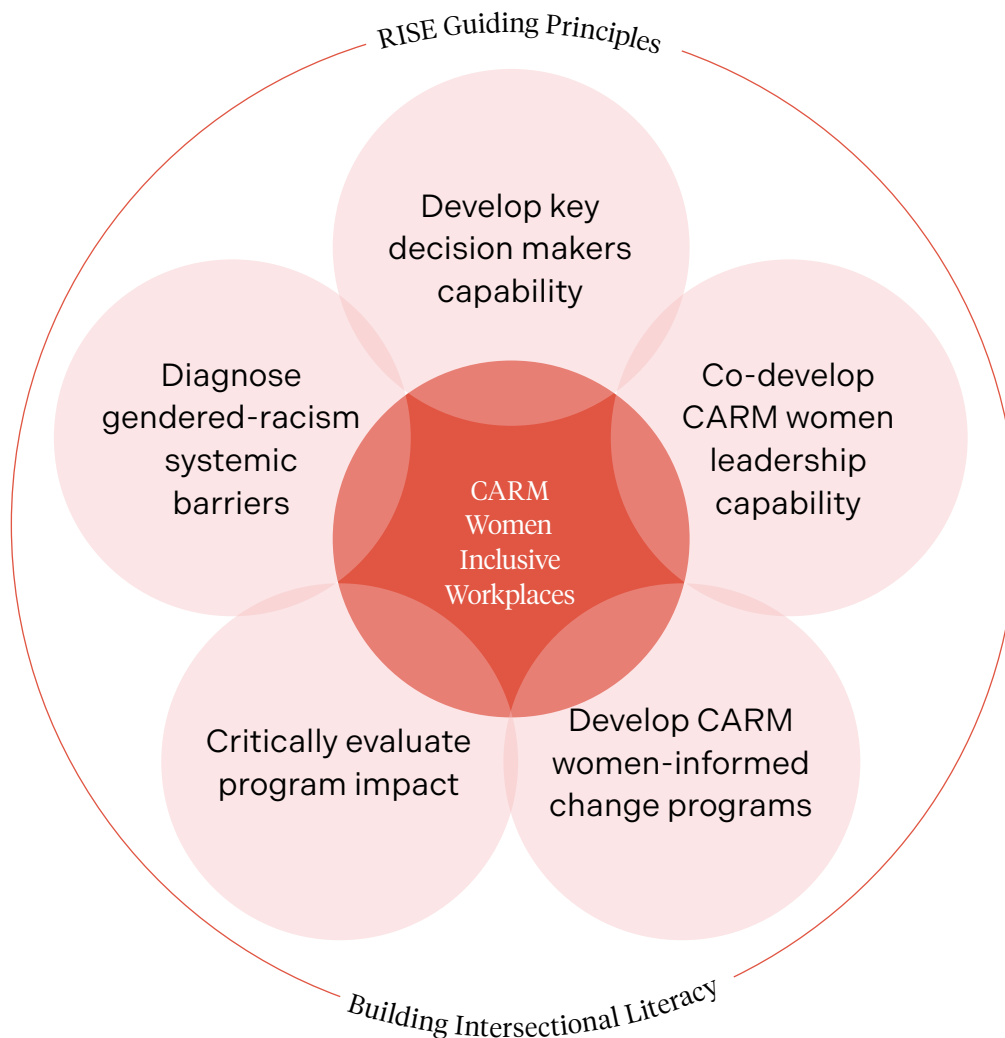
Even though CARM women are ambitious, capable and resilient, this research has shown that they experience a range of entrenched systemic barriers in Australian workplaces such as:

- being assessed against biased leadership models
- not having access to the influential social networks where promotion decisions are often made
- not having their voices centred so their lived experiences at work can be better understood (including when organisations are trying to develop and promote CARM women into senior leadership).

The RISE project worked to implement lasting change interventions that addressed the root causes of these issues.



About RISE



This groundbreaking project was guided by five interconnected principles

Our systems-focused approach addressed gendered racism through five guiding principles that informed interconnected areas of work:

- 1. Disrupt systemic barriers** – Identify and address the organisational structures, norms and practices that (re)produce inequities for CARM women.
- 2. Develop key decision-makers capability** – Build the capacity and capability of key decision-makers to recognise and respond to gendered racism, including strengthening their ability to engage with racism and sexism as intersecting systems of power that compound CARM women's marginalisation.
- 3. Co-develop CARM women's leadership capability** – Centre CARM women's voices to support them in their leadership pathways, recognising that capability exists and it is access to opportunity that is uneven and structurally constrained.
- 4. Develop change processes informed by CARM women** – Ensure that organisational change is informed by those most affected, embedding lived experience as a fundamental input to diagnosis, design, implementation, decision-making and evaluation.
- 5. Critically evaluate program impact** – Establish mechanisms that include and centre on CARM women to assess not only what is implemented but how effectively it contributes to effective and sustainable structural change.

Key Insights



Key Insights: Designing for Intersectionality

Intersectionality theory tells us that the barriers faced by CARM women are simultaneously produced by organisational systems and lived in their individual bodies and careers. So, any project genuinely informed by an intersectionality lens must be built with this duality in mind - the design must reflect the theory.

This is RISE's greatest insight: that *design is the message*. For the project to truly centre intersectionality, it needed to operate at two levels simultaneously: the organisational or systemic (macro) and the individual (micro). This is the intersectionality imperative, not a project design nice-to-have. The RISE infrastructure was built accordingly.

Participant Pathway

Met CARM women where they were at, recognising that structural change and individual development must move together.

The pathway offered two suites of support:

Universally accessible offerings available to all participating CARM women, including networking sessions, strengths profiling, and individually tailored support, including confidential conversations with project leads and personalised career advancement planning.

Individually tailored mentoring and coaching activities and negotiating sponsorship arrangements. Women also had access to a culturally inclusive adaptation of the CEW Leaders Program, intentionally adapted, because inclusion that does not account for culture is inclusion in name only.

The design is
the message



Organisational Pathway

Supported participating organisations to identify and address the systemic barriers locking CARM women out of executive leadership. This pathway was informed by data and support in three interconnected areas:

The **ASSESS to RISE diagnostic tool**, completed by an internal project team (see Appendix 2 for more information on how project teams were formed) and CARM women participants. The tool helped establish the state of play, and was deliberately designed to name gendered racism as a structural phenomenon, not individual behaviour (i.e. CARM women who need another leadership training). Each organisation then received a confidential report and a presentation on its results to inform its action plan. Findings from the diagnostic informed tailored action plans, providing organisations with a strategic framework to drive lasting, targeted change.

As RISE was designed to centre the voices of CARM women as data, not an afterthought, **Centring Voice** sessions with CARM women ensured collaboration throughout the project, prioritising lived experiences in a racially and psychologically safe forum.

Regular progress and community of practice (CoP) meetings worked to build practitioner capability. Australian organisations are at an early stage of capability building on gendered racism and intersectionality – and that is precisely where cross-organisational collaboration proved most powerful. Participating organisations benefited significantly from shared learning, exchanging ideas, and gaining reassurance that others were navigating similar complexities. Rather than reinventing the wheel, organisations drew on each other's experiences to identify and address overlapping systemic barriers with greater confidence. The question project teams asked most frequently said it all: *"What are other organisations doing on...?"*

Key Insights: Methodology

Designing RISE in the way we did taught us something beyond the project itself: that intersectionality is not simply a conceptual framework for understanding compounded marginalisations. It is a methodology that actively shapes how you research, design, and deliver. A framework tells you what to look for; a methodology tells you how to look, *who* to centre, and *what counts as knowledge*. By building RISE on an intersectional methodology, we generated several insights that we unpack below, insights that a framework-only approach would have missed entirely.

Key insight 1:

Intersectionality is essential to understanding CARM women's experiences of the workplace

It is clear that race-neutral gender equity work does not address the lived realities of women positioned at the intersections of sexist and racist structures of power. This is because interventions designed for women in general are designed around partial understandings of women's experiences and benefit only those who are closest to the dominant norms of womanhood.

This "single lens, gender only" approach means issues are not always diagnosed accurately and the effectiveness of interventions can be limited:

- When we focus on or assume shared experiences among all women, inequalities are obscured. We overlook how other marginalisations that some women experience simultaneously with sexism – such as racism, ableism, classism, homophobia or transphobia – shape access to opportunities and resources
- Benefits accrue to those who are already relatively privileged (e.g. white, Anglo, cis, heterosexual women)
- The barriers experienced by CARM women are misdiagnosed and misattributed (e.g. to a lack of confidence, or worse, reduced to a problem of "culture", capability, or skills/experience, rather than to the structural issues and power dynamics that cause marginalisation)
- Aggregated gender data alone suggests progress is being made while hiding inequities for CARM women, giving a false sense of success.

At its core, RISE was guided by a clear objective: to move beyond generic leadership efforts for CARM women that focus on improving their capability (therefore assuming they lack leadership qualities and potential) to instead address the organisational conditions that shape unequal outcomes.

291

Expressions
of Interest

46

Applications
from
organisations

1.1 Australian organisations want to create genuinely inclusive workplaces – and intersectionality is key

The project received 291 expressions of interest and 46 applications from organisations seeking to participate in the project and strengthen their gender equality frameworks, recognising that existing approaches have not benefited all women equally or addressed the diverse experiences within their workforces. A key theme in meetings with organisations interested in participating in the project was a strategic drive to elevate diversity within leadership teams so they better reflect the diversity of their clientele and workforce.

1.2 Going beyond siloed approaches

For most organisations, the RISE Project represented a first step toward moving beyond siloed diversity and inclusion initiatives and adopting a genuinely intersectional approach to D&I. Although RISE focused on the specific intersection of gender, culture, and race, organisations widely viewed it as a pilot that could inform a broader, more comprehensive intersectional approach to organisational D&I.

1.3 Doing intersectionality is hard because of low intersectionality literacy

Addressing systemic barriers through an intersectional lens is complex because there is limited understanding of how overlapping and compounding systems of inequity are embedded within organisational systems. While organisations were highly interested in tackling systemic barriers, they found that significantly more learning, reflection, and capability building was required to understand and address systemic barriers intersectionally, which meant building understandings on the nuances of intersectionality to begin with.

1.4 Moving away from transactional engagements towards transformative strategies grounded in relationality and reflexivity.

Project teams often found that feedback from CARM women during Centring Voice sessions highlighted the need to move beyond interventions that were easy to implement but limited in impact. For example, featuring a CARM woman as a speaker at an International Women's Day event was seen as visible and straightforward, yet it did little to shift the systemic barriers affecting CARM women's progression into leadership roles. In contrast, participants emphasised the importance of interventions that could drive sustainable change, such as building racial and intersectionality literacy across the organisation so that teams and managers were more aware of CARM women's inclusion needs. This feedback underscored the value of investing in deeper, capability-building strategies rather than relying solely on symbolic or one-off activities.

In Community of Practice sessions, project team members reflected that reflexive practice was essential throughout the project. This was particularly important for those without lived experience, as many were hearing CARM women's workplace experiences for the first time. Engaging in ongoing reflection on their own positionality and workplace experiences helped team members recognise how organisational systems and practices could contribute to the marginalisation of CARM women. This reflective process supported deeper understanding and more informed decision-making as teams worked to design meaningful and equitable interventions.

Although we have more analysis to do on RISE outcomes, we have identified many enablers for change from the participating organisations and project leads. We also have insights into which interventions were most common for each priority area.



Top Tip

Framing matters! The questions an organisation asks determines not only what it sees (what the problem is), but also what it comes to understand as requiring change (what needs fixing).



Key insight 2:

To do intersectionality well, organisations need to understand their state of play

Organisations cannot design effective interventions for CARM women without first understanding the specific systemic barriers operating within their own walls. But intersectionality demands more than a standard organisational diagnostic - it requires a fundamentally different way of understanding the problem itself. Rather than examining race and gender as separate issues, organisations must learn to see how these systems interact and compound, producing barriers that are invisible to a single-lens approach and therefore routinely missed by conventional organisational change efforts. This means:

2.1 Collecting the right data is important

To develop a comprehensive view of the state of play for gendered racism, you need to use mixed methods. It is for this reason that we employed multiple data-gathering approaches.

- The ASSESS to RISE (A2R) organisational diagnostic tool (quantitative), designed to centre CARM women's perspectives. See Appendix 3 for more information on the A2R Tool.
- Centring Voice sessions with CARM Women (qualitative). See Appendix 4 for more information on the Centring Voice Framework.

Data from the ASSESS to RISE tool proved to be highly valuable, and reinforced the importance of collecting the right kind of data for organisational change.

- A2R data helped organisations gain a clear, evidence-based understanding of the state of gendered racism across Australia and identify how systemic barriers or “sticking

points” present in organisational processes, policies and practices. It was particularly useful because most organisations had never before applied an organisational diagnostic tool that focused on the intersection of race and gender.

- Most organisations found that their A2R data was starkly different from the data collected in their standard inclusion surveys. Unlike general inclusion surveys, which effectively render CARM women's experiences invisible, the A2R tool amplified their voices to specifically inform organisational change. A2R data enabled organisations to gain a much clearer understanding of CARM women's workplace experiences, leading to a more accurate diagnosis of the systemic barriers they face and, in turn, more effective interventions.

- While the report provided valuable insights into systemic barriers, the volume and complexity of issues identified through the audit process were a surprise to many project teams. Multiple meetings and debrief sessions were organised with DCA's intersectionality subject matter experts to unpack the contents of the report and support organisations with understanding the terminology and concepts discussed in the report. These sessions were vital in supporting organisations with building literacy and understanding of the specific ways in which CARM women are experiencing systemic barriers within the organisation's business and industrial context.

Centring voices of those most marginalised is key to understanding state of play

- Intersectionality is not just an analytical lens; it is a directive about whose knowledge counts. If CARM women are those most affected by gendered racism, then their voices are not simply a consultation mechanism; they are the most authoritative source of evidence about the problem and its solutions.
- The primacy of CARM women's voices was evident throughout RISE. Rather than being positioned as passive recipients of organisational change, CARM women were active change agents, from diagnosis through to delivery and evaluation. Specifically, CARM women:
 - co-reviewed the systemic barriers identified in the A2R report to better understand the state of play
 - shaped the organisation's change strategies by co-designing the action plan that prioritised the identified barriers and set out the interventions.
 - co-delivered change initiatives as the project progressed
 - co-evaluated change impacts and redirected implementation processes as needed.

Through RISE, we have learned that Centring Voice is:

- about more than performative "participation" – it is about generating critical organisational knowledge to identify the sticking points within systems, policies and cultures that may otherwise be invisible
- not simply a "consultation mechanism" – it is a structural practice that is important for precise, legitimate and effective organisational interventions
- insufficient on its own – it becomes tokenistic without accompanying accountability and leadership commitment



Key Learning:

Co-designing action plans with CARM women produced fundamentally different (and arguably better) outcomes than organisations would have achieved by engaging in this change process alone. For many participating organisations, RISE provided the first structured opportunity for CARM women to articulate their workplace experiences and the systemic barriers they faced. That knowledge had always existed; it had simply never been invited into organisational decision-making. Project teams consistently described co-design sessions as eye-opening, with perspectives visibly shifted. The lesson is unambiguous: when you centre the voices of those most affected, you change not just the plan; you change the thinking behind it.

“I looked around the room of 60-odd leaders, and I realised *only two were of diverse backgrounds.*”

- project lead

Key insight 3:

Who is in the room and who has power in it matters – it determines outcomes for CARM women

Centring CARM women's voices is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Who is in the room matters, but so does whether those people have genuine influence over decisions, resources, and outcomes. RISE reinforced what the research already tells us: representation without power is symbolic, and symbolism does not dismantle systemic barriers. We learnt two critical things:

3.1. Having a critical mass matters, especially for accountability

RISE reinforced that there is strength in numbers.

- Organisations that maintained a critical mass of CARM women throughout the change process generated something qualitatively different: upward accountability pressure.
- When collective voices consistently named systemic barriers, leadership could no longer treat gendered racism as an isolated complaint or individual experience. It became an organisational reality that demanded a response, resources, and action.

3.2. Getting the data to the right people matters just as much as collecting it

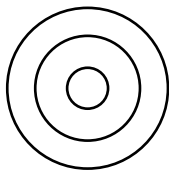
- Collecting robust data on gendered racism means little if it does not reach the people with the power to act on it. We found two groups of stakeholders to be critical when socialising the data about gendered racism:
 - **Executive and senior leadership**, whose awareness of systemic barriers, and whose control (including approvals) over budgets and organisational resources directly shaped what is possible in action plan implementation.
 - **CARM women's direct managers**, whose gatekeeping role in CARM women's day-to-day career progression decisions and conversations made them a pivotal, yet frequently overlooked group in the change process.
- Organisations that socialised the data effectively generated stronger buy-in across teams and more meaningful implementation of action plan components. Data alone does not create change; it has to travel to the right rooms, carried by people with the authority to act on it.

Key insight 4:

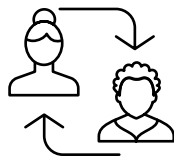
Building practitioner capability to operationalise intersectionality is paramount

Practitioners operationalising intersectionality require access to ongoing capability-building programs, peer learning opportunities, and community-of-practice sessions. Practitioner capability (crucially, practitioner capability relating to racial and intersectional literacy) significantly shapes how effectively organisations address gendered racism.

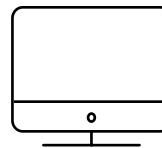
The RISE Project applied three learning and development strategies to build practitioner capability:



**Targeted sessions
by intersectionality
experts**



**Peer-to-peer
learning**



**A virtual learning and
resource platform:
the RISE Hub.**

See Appendix 5 for more information on each of the methods above.

Importantly, we found that when D&I practitioners' work is informed by intersectionality, they are more likely to:

- 1 embrace D&I work as iterative and cyclical practice -**
Intersectionality-informed change does not happen in a single intervention; it requires multiple review cycles with diverse stakeholder groups, deliberate incremental progress, and ongoing evaluation. Effective strategies are refined continuously, not finalised once.
- 2 recognise that intersectionality insights are dynamic and (r)evolutionary -** Marginalisation is not static; it is continuously shaped by shifts in government policy, sociopolitical conditions, and organisational context. Intersectional D&I practice must therefore be flexible, closely aligned with organisational strategy, and supported by cross-vertical collaboration and senior executive engagement to remain relevant and sustainable.

Key Insights: Systemic Barriers and Enablers

Key insight 1:

Racial literacy is foundational to intersectional literacy

Understanding racism in a clear and nuanced way emerged as a crucial first step for organisations seeking to respond to CARM women's workplace experiences. It is the foundation to understanding how racism and sexism interact as systems of inequity.

The A2R tool showed us that low levels of literacy about race and intersectionality limited people's understanding of the systemic barriers CARM women experience in the workplace. We found that:

- Without a baseline of racial literacy, more complex forms of intersectional analysis and dialogue are difficult to sustain.
- Addressing gendered racism isn't about "adding race" into existing gender strategies. It requires organisations to first build the conceptual and organisational capability to recognise how race operates within their systems, cultures and leadership structures.

CARM women need ...

“Anti-racism and allyship training for all staff, including leadership staff. People of colour/ women of colour resource group [should be offered] paid consultation instead of burdening us with extra cultural load and emotional labour in constantly having to advocate for ourselves.”

– Our Voice participant forum contribution



Top Tip

Racial safety is foundational to organisational change for CARM women. Without it, organisations risk limiting CARM women's participation. They might not share their full experiences or insights, which are vital for creating systemic change (i.e. they "hold back").

Key insight 2:

Racial safety is a pre-condition for effective participation

Another key insight was that organisations cannot expect open dialogue, participation or disclosure from CARM women without first creating the conditions for racial safety.

CARM women often do not feel safe speaking openly about the ways in which their race and gender shape their workplace experiences.¹⁷

Key insight 3:

Access to social capital accelerates leadership progression

Leadership progression for CARM women is not determined by capability alone. Rather, informal organisational dynamics, particularly access to social capital, are a critical factor in shaping leadership outcomes. This includes access to:

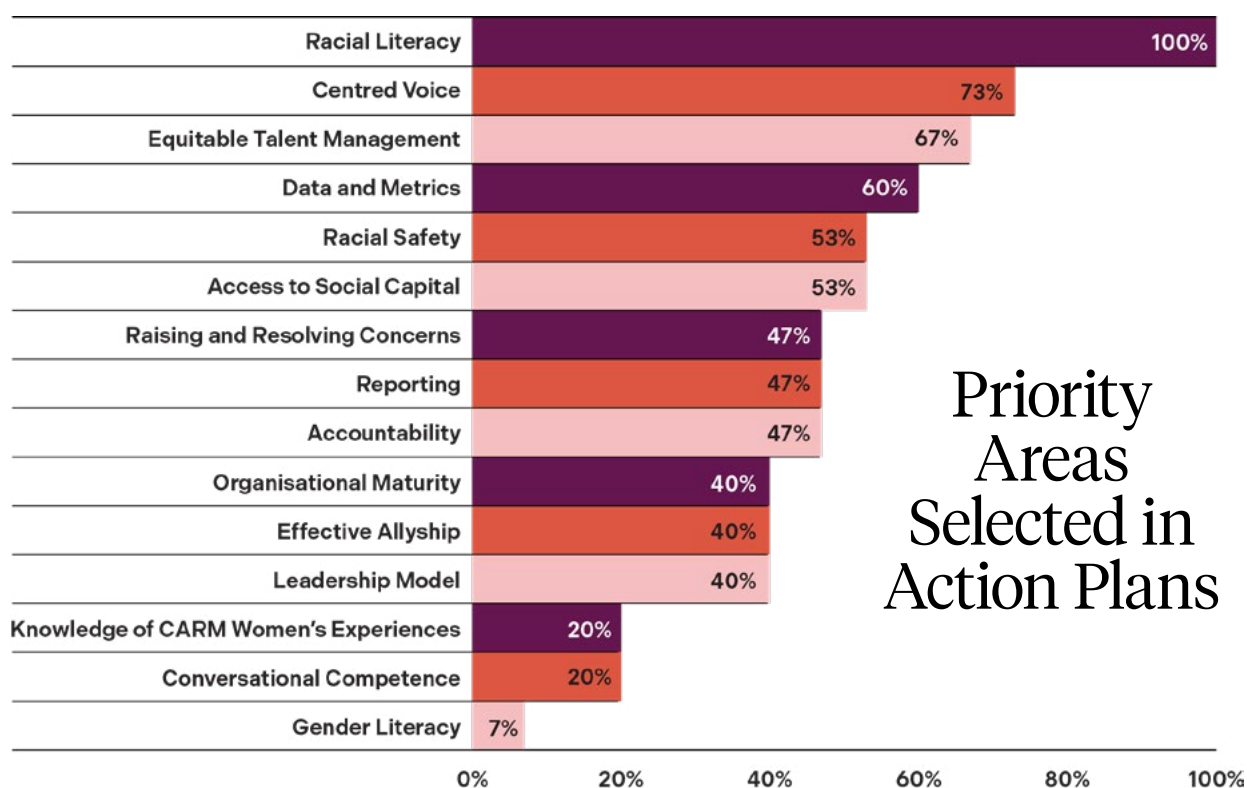
- sponsorship (access to visibility)
- influential networks and relationships
- advocacy
- leadership pathways.

Leadership interventions that focus on building individual confidence, skills or leadership capability are insufficient to advance CARM women's careers if they overlook these relational and structural aspects of advancement.

Key insight 4:

Priority areas shift when intersectionality is the lens

When organisations examined their workplace through a gendered racism lens, what rose to the top of the agenda looked markedly different from conventional gender equity priorities. Because the A2R tool with its gendered racism lens deliberately asked questions that mainstream gender equity tools do not, organisations consistently identified and prioritised areas that traditional approaches routinely overlook, including building racial literacy, centring the voices of CARM women, creating racial safety, and addressing access to social capital and sponsorship (as shown in the Figure 1 below).



The data in the Figure 1 above speaks clearly: when organisations examine structural inequity through a gendered racism lens, different priorities emerge, ones that are routinely invisible within single-lens, gender-only approaches. In the RISE action plans, racial literacy was prioritised by every single participating organisation and centring the voices of CARM women was prioritised by almost 75% of all organisations. These are not priorities that typically feature in mainstream gender equity agendas.

Equally significant is what happened with more familiar priority areas. Even where organisations selected areas such as equitable talent management or data and metrics, the intersectionality lens produced more nuanced, targeted interventions than a single-lens gender-equity approach would have. Intersectionality did not just change *what* organisations prioritised—it changed *how* they thought about everything on the list.

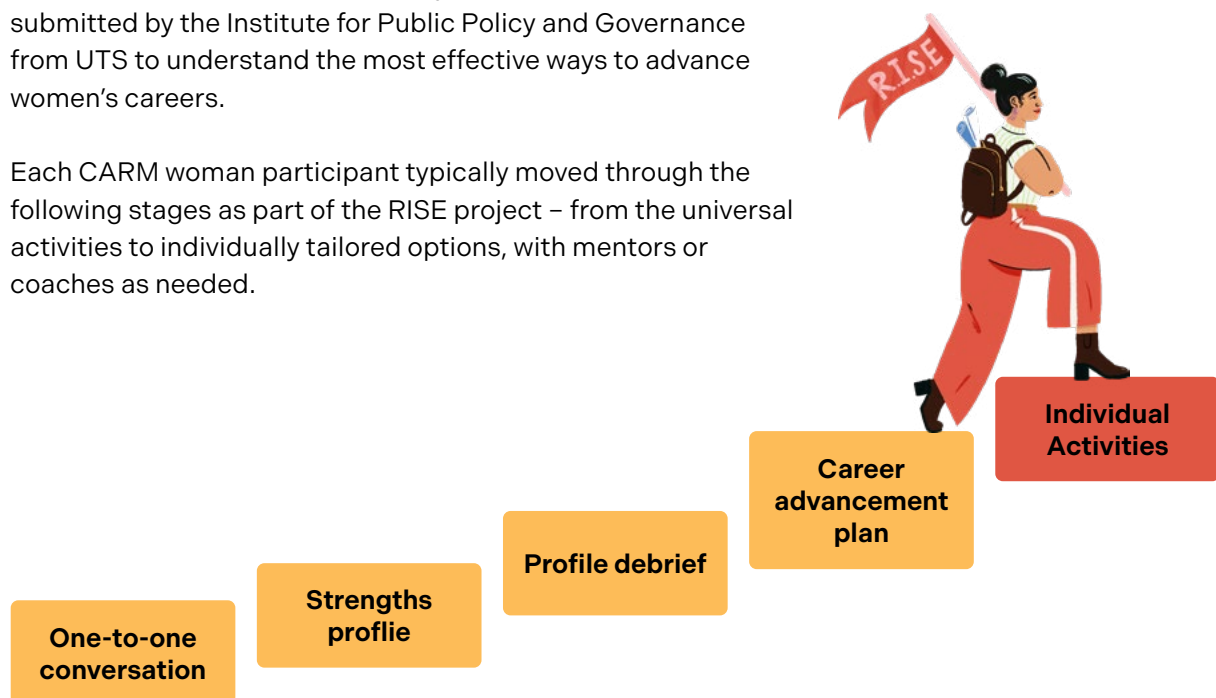
Key Insights: Designing for CARM Women—What RISE Showed us

Key insight 1:

Five critical elements for success

The RISE model for the participant pathway included five critical elements that were underpinned by a commissioned report submitted by the Institute for Public Policy and Governance from UTS to understand the most effective ways to advance women's careers.

Each CARM woman participant typically moved through the following stages as part of the RISE project – from the universal activities to individually tailored options, with mentors or coaches as needed.



The most critical elements were those that had the most impact on the participants we worked with, in that they provided light bulb moments for participants, illustrated their career potential and it helped them understand something of themselves that gave them strength and encouragement.

“[the project] provided an easy roadmap to follow to progress our thinking and strategy and really launched us as an organisation into action. The training, networking sessions and activities were of a very high standard, realistic and holistic. This added to the overall engagement and commitment to the Program across the organisation.”

- project lead

These critical elements of success were:

1:1 conversation
with SSI RISE
lead and
tailored support

For the conversation to be impactful it was critical that the lead had lived experience herself. She was able to tease out the experiences participants had, how they saw themselves, their career hopes and goals. Some felt 'seen' for the very first time in the work context. Timely response to situational needs such as preparation for job interviews were essential for those who were less familiar with systems or culturally not in tune with effective strategies.



Strengths profile
and debrief
by accredited
professional

The Langley strengths profile provides unique opportunities to look at strengths only, how often strengths are used and whether they are energising or not and therefore provide flow and productivity. For many this was affirming, but it also meant that they had to reflect on how they could use their strengths more and how they could communicate that better. It made an enormous difference on how participants saw themselves and accordingly it was central to developing the career advancement plan, a critical document to track career progress.



Matched
mentors and
coaches

The effective matching of mentors and participants was essential to enhance outcomes for participants. Being CARM women's centred meant that women were asked as to their preferences for a mentor, or coach in some cases. Most mentors were of CARM background themselves which participants asked for. Criteria of matching included cultural background, industry, gender, recency of migration, if relevant, career seniority and criteria the participants set themselves.



Networking
events

The networking element cannot be underestimated. Six weekly online networking events allowed for inspiration, learning and reflecting, but more importantly it provided a community. Participants remained engaged. If they did not have time for anything else they did make time for the 1 hour they could immerse themselves in all things RISE.



Culturally
inclusive CEW
leadership
course

A culturally inclusive RISE leadership program with an elevated framework that embedded a strong and intentional lens on cultural and racial inclusion throughout, rather than treating it as an add-on, set participants onto a leadership trajectory that was cognisant of what they are facing as CARM women in workplaces.

Key insight 2:

CARM women's experiences are not a monolith

Recognising the diversity within CARM women's experiences was critical to ensuring that the project delivered tailored support. This included diversity in professional experience, and experiences with migration and settlement.

For example, although this project was targeted CARM women in middle management, we found that some participants were quite junior. This concept of middle management also varied. While initially thinking about this as CARM women in people management roles, participants included CARM women who were senior experts in their field but could not climb any higher without more people management experience. This diversity in seniority is important for how gendered racism shows up in CARM women's career progression – often the juniority was a symbol of the barriers themselves.

Participants were from diverse backgrounds; some migrated recently, while others were second and third generation CARM women. Some participants were born in Australia or went to school in Australia and were familiar with Australian culture and norms. Despite these differences, the experience of gendered racism was universal.

These differing experiences with migration and settlement (explored below) contributed another dimension to CARM women's experiences and needed to be accommodated in the design of support provided to participants as part of the project.

Those RISE participants who were migrants to Australia had arrived at different times. What they had in common with many migrants in Australia was that their qualifications were not recognised and they started their career in Australia at a much lower level than warranted for their qualifications and overseas experience. They also reported feeling financial pressure, having little family support in Australia and dealing with a lack of childcare – a heavy burden leaving aside pressures to perform at high levels at work. Feeling under pressure and struggling with settlement is common among migrants in general, but often the burden is on women once they have a family to support and caring responsibilities.¹⁸

“Thinking about race was confronting, but I now see the importance of naming racism rather than using euphemisms.”

- participant

Key Insights: Designing for CARM women

Key insight 3:

Recognise where CARM women are starting from

Mentors and coaches shared their insights into where this cohort differed from other cohorts they have supported. They concluded that many of the RISE participants:

didn't begin from a place of confidence, optimism or assumption of fairness – instead, they suffered from the **accumulated impact of repeated exclusion**, discounting and stalled progression over time

had learned that **speaking up could lead to being labelled** “difficult”, “aggressive” or “not a cultural fit” and thus, over time, they had learned not to be too visible, not to outshine, to be grateful to be there, to work harder, to stay quiet – silence had become a self-protection strategy and did not represent a lack of insight

were traumatised, with trauma often being cumulative and from several workplaces, rather than tied to a single event – **trauma** shows up as hyper-vigilance in conversations, over-preparation and over-qualification, and withdrawal after negative interactions

carried multiple **invisible burdens** (migration, race, gender, accent, age, caregiving, visa history) and needed permission to reclaim their voice, confidence and legitimacy

felt **invisible**, manifesting as being in the room but not being heard, contributions being overlooked and then repeated by others, achievements not being recognised unless endorsed by someone “closer to power” – they felt like they were doing the work and contributing value, but getting an opportunity seemed out of reach

presented with **deep self-doubt** due to their experiences despite objective evidence of competence so establishing trust was a key focus – their biggest hurdle was unlearning internalised limitation and taking up space without apology and over-justifying.

RISE key performance measures – preliminary results

Of the 360 CARM women participants:

269	63	50	157	1,760
took at least one step towards their career goals	secured a new role	participated in leadership courses, including the CEW Leaders Program	attended mentoring or coaching sessions, which totalled 623 sessions.	attendances across the 19 participant networking sessions.

These insights were also evident and illuminated in the one-to-one conversations with the SSI project lead, who has experienced racism and discrimination in many forms as a migrant from an African background. Her lived experiences helped participants to be open and frank, exploring their own experiences of racism and discrimination.

Key Insights:

“RISE was very affirming for me. I realised others were in the same position as me... we feel our skills are not used as they should be and our careers are not progressing the same as the careers of other colleagues.”

- participant

Key insight 4:

The project is having an impact on CARM women's careers

Career goals are being reached as identified in the career advancement plans, using the steps identified and taking up opportunities that present themselves.

Key performance indicators for the RISE project were identified from the commencement of the project. These were designed to measure career-related outcomes, including progress towards career goals and the number of actual promotions that occurred as part of enabling women to thrive and implement change strategies in their organisations.

These quantitative measures used the proven assumption that investment in career-enhancing activities will lead to career outcomes, as demonstrated by commissioned research (see Appendix 6). They contribute to the overall goal of CARM women progressing in their careers because of participating in RISE.

Key insight 5:

RISE activities enhanced participants' skills, assertiveness and self-reflection

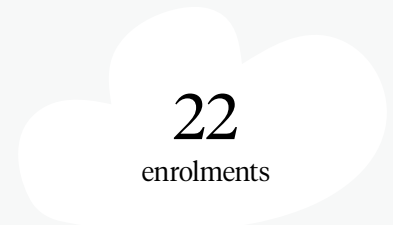
Early feedback collected from RISE participants from networking events and interactions when developing the career advancement plan were overwhelmingly positive. Specifically, participants named the impact of the strengths profile, the learning embedded in the networking events and the availability of staff to provide direct support when needed, one on one and timely targeting a particular need.

More importantly, together with the feedback from the mentor experience, participants are reporting an increase in confidence in that they spoke up effectively for themselves, broadened their networks, tackled difficult conversations with their managers and learnt to take charge of their own career advancement. Based on self-reflection and observing others they gained the skills to analyse a situation and respond assertively and skilfully.

Key insight 6:

The RISE-specific Leaders Program built confidence and connection

Early evaluation data from participants who completed the culturally revised CEW Leaders Program offers encouraging signals of meaningful impact. The program had 22 enrolments from CARM women across eight of the RISE organisations.



Feedback reflects strong outcomes for confidence, clarity and connection:

94%
of participants agreed they understand their unique strengths and how to amplify them.

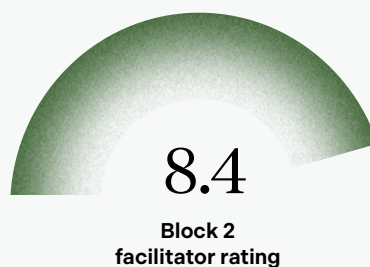
100%
agreed they have new tools to enhance their executive presence.

100%
agreed they have clarity on their leadership goals and the confidence to pursue them.

100%
agreed they cultivated supportive relationships and have new tools to grow their professional network.

94%
agreed they feel ready for executive leadership.

Facilitators and guest speakers were consistently rated highly across all program delivery locations for being engaging and authentic, and for fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments. Across the two program blocks, facilitator ratings averaged 8.1 and 8.4 respectively, with the program achieving a net promoter score of 100.



Key insight 7:

We faced some unexpected challenges

The following table captures some of the challenges we noticed as the project progressed.

Factor	Challenges
Seniority and motivation	Some participants were in junior management or project officer roles. Some were in short-term jobs with managers that had no interest in their advancement. Some were tapped on the shoulder to join the project because they met the description of CARM; hence, they lacked motivation. At times, it was quite challenging to engage participants, and much follow-up was needed.
Capacity to engage	Participants at several organisations worked billable hours, with some more flexible than others. We also had a few long absences from participants, mainly related to maternity leave, and redundancies. One organisation had to pull out towards the end of the project as it had very few CARM women left on staff.
Non-core workstreams	Some participants were working in non-core streams within the organisation. For example, they might have worked in the finance sector but belonged to the IT support team. Their career trajectory was very limited as they had no financial education.

Finally, the project worked with more social service organisations than expected. Interestingly, these organisations, some of which work explicitly with migrants, were not immune to race-based discrimination.

One project lead said,

“RISE made us aware that there is racism in our workplace, that we need to own it, name it and do something about it.”

Key Insights: What Works

Across our work with the 25 organisations, several common drivers of effective organisational change to address gendered racism emerged – regardless of size, sector, or resources.

Key insight 1:

Regardless of size, organisational conditions can enable change

The RISE participating organisations varied greatly in size and industry, from large ASX300 organisations to smaller non-government organisations (NGOs) and not-for-profits. This meant that the available resources (both financial and staffing), level of leadership buy-in and organisational maturity also varied, requiring the RISE project team to provide tailored advice and support.

Even so, common themes emerged that show the enablers for organisational change to address gendered racism.

Time as a barrier for participants



Across the participating organisations, the capacity for participants to dedicate time to their own development on top of their substantive roles was a challenge. In larger organisations that worked on billable hour models, this could be a particular barrier, as it positioned participants' development in opposition to the needs of the business. At the same time, in smaller NGOs, some participants were reticent to prioritise their development as this took them away from their important client-facing work.

Successful organisations addressed these barriers. Examples included:

- **in larger organisations** establishing a cost centre code for RISE participant development to enable participant time to be logged as billable hours
- **in smaller NGOs** initiating peer collaboration opportunities, such as watch parties (watching networking sessions and learning content together), and emphasising the strategic importance of participation to their service delivery.

Key Insights: What Works

Key Driver	Organisational characteristics	Examples in action
Having organisational maturity in D&I OR a growth mindset*	- Organisation has existing D&I strategies, policies or practices and high D&I literacy - Organisation is committed to social equity with a growth mindset	- Embed gender and racial literacy throughout the organisation (e.g. across learning strategies and policies) - Commit to continuous improvement and have accountability measures to support this (e.g. ongoing learning requirements for leaders; representation targets in public strategies)
Dedicating meaningful organisational resources (including time and time) to intersectional gender inclusion	- Organisation demonstrates sustained commitment to resourcing broader intersectional gender inclusion, not just for the project, as an ongoing strategic priority - Leadership actively allocates dedicated time, budget, and staffing to intersectional D&I work, reflecting genuine organisational will rather than compliance	- Ensure buy-in from executive leadership (e.g. through an executive sponsor) with genuine decision-making power - Have the right project team (including a D&I lead) with protected, dedicated time to do this work meaningfully - Invest time in participant development and recognise this as core work
Embedding intersectionality (intersectional gender equality) within organisational strategy, not alongside it, or as an additive	- Organisation has moved beyond treating gendered racism as a standalone D&I initiative: it is explicitly named and addressed within core strategic priorities - Organisation holds itself publicly accountable through external commitments to D&I, including targets for CARM women's leadership - Organisation recognises that gendered racism is not only an internal workforce issue but shapes how it shows up for the communities it serves	- Embed racial equity explicitly in key strategic documents, not as an addendum or line item, but as a named priority - Include measurable targets for CARM women's leadership in published gender equality strategies - Connect anti-racism and racial equity to core business imperatives, including service delivery and community outcomes

* A 'growth mindset' describes organisations who saw participating in RISE as a learning opportunity, where they could challenge and stretch their thinking about, and their approach to, race and gender and how they intersect at work.

Key insight 2:

Successful project leads bring understanding, access and commitment

It was also clear that project leads in the internal project teams played a pivotal role in effecting organisational change and supporting the success of CARM women participants. There were common characteristics among project leads who were able to achieve transformative change for CARM women and address gendered racism in their organisations.

Enabler	Project lead characteristics	Examples in action
Understanding the importance of racial safety and being open to learning	• Lived experience of cultural or racial marginalisation OR high racial & intersectionality literacy • Growth mindset and valuing ongoing learning – truth listening¹⁹	• Some project leads were CARM women themselves, while others were deeply knowledgeable about racism and intersectionality • Project leads treated the RISE project as a learning opportunity • They received the uncomfortable truths revealed by the project and took action
Having access to organisational power and knowledge to make a difference	• High level of institutional knowledge • Skillset to effect change within the structures they operate in • Trusted role within organisational context (e.g. via tenure)	• Project leads understood the change levers in their organisation and how they could be used to address gendered racism and benefit CARM women • Their advice was trusted by executive leadership, providing higher levels of buy-in and commitment
Leading equitably	• Willingness to use their own social capital for transformative change • Commitment to equity and achieving outcomes for CARM women • Willingness to de-centre self – leading from behind/beside CARM women • Ability and willingness to advocate – beyond allyship	• Project leads were invested in the project's outcomes for their organisation and the participants themselves • They were happy to centre the voices of CARM women rather than being in the spotlight • They were more than allies, providing individual advocacy in their organisation on behalf of the CARM women

Key insight 3:

Organisations had interventions in common for the priority areas

The following table outlines the most common change interventions that organisations designed in their action plans.

Focus area	Change interventions
Racial literacy	• Develop an ongoing learning and development strategy that incorporates anti-racism education, panel discussions on key concepts, and ethical storytelling • Embed racial literacy expectations within leadership capability frameworks • Use internal communication channels on days of significance to introduce and reinforce key terms and concepts (e.g. International Women of Colour Day on 1 March or the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on 21 March)
Centred voice	• Hold quarterly (or regular) listening sessions with CARM women • Ensure CARM women are represented in employee resource groups (ERGs) and governance structures • Apply the Centring Voice framework to co-diagnose, co-design, co-deliver and co-evaluate action plans
Access to social capital	Sponsorship and advocacy • Connect CARM women with sponsors who can advocate for career opportunities • Ensure sponsors or coaches have done anti-racism training • Structure sponsorship to include leadership events, shadowing senior leaders, and senior project roles • Develop pilot sponsorship programs to promote career opportunities and visibility Mentoring programs • Establish mentoring programs with culturally safe practices training • Create coaching networks where CARM women are coached by CARM women • Implement reverse mentorship programs where CARM women mentor senior leaders on inclusive leadership • Provide mentoring resources, conversation scripts and agenda templates Networking and visibility • Provide equitable access to influential professional networks • Increase CARM women's participation in industry and leadership events • Facilitate cross-faculty or cross-functional networking among CARM women • Create opportunities to increase visibility Leadership development • Develop leadership programs that are inclusive for CARM women • Embed procedures for shadowing, mentoring and sponsorship opportunities • Ensure all RISE participants have one-to-one leadership development opportunities

Focus area	Change interventions
Data and metrics	Data collection and systems • Enable voluntary self-identification for race, culture and ethnicity in human resource information systems (HRISs) (e.g. Workday, SuccessFactors) • Include new data fields in HRISs to count CARM workers and leaders • Conduct periodic diversity surveys that include culture, race, ethnicity, inclusion and wellbeing measures • Capture demographic data through anonymous pulse surveys, workday reports and off-boarding processes Workforce analysis • Identify the “critical drop-off point” (seniority level) where CARM women’s representation drops compared with overall representation • Determine the current baseline of CARM women in leadership roles • Define differences between nationality, race, ethnicity and culture for clearer reporting Talent management metrics • Measure participation rates in coaching, sponsorship and mentoring programs • Monitor reported inclusion/exclusion in pulse survey data

The experiences of the CARM women participants have shown us what works for individuals seeking to progress in their careers. Commitment and culturally inclusive programs are essential.

“Participating in the RISE Project has been a valuable and engaging experience, particularly through its strong focus on centring lived experience and creating space for honest reflection. The project’s approach of elevating the voices of CARM women helped deepen my understanding of how leadership norms, organisational culture, and informal practices influence progression.”

- project lead

Key insight 4:

Commitment from everyone involved enables individuals to thrive

The experiences of the CARM women participants have shown us what works for individuals seeking to progress in their careers. Commitment and culturally inclusive programs are essential.

Participants drove their own career outcomes as much as organisations contributed to it. But there were key enablers for participants:

- **Success depended on the support participants received from their internal RISE project team.** Some teams knew every participant, regularly brought them together, asked for their input and kept abreast of their career development. Other teams went through the participant's manager to gain some insights, which was less effective depending on the interests and capacity of the manager to contribute. True commitment of all those directly involved with the project is essential.
- **Support from a divisional people leader.** Participants had more opportunities to thrive in those organisations where staff were supported by a divisional people leader as opposed to having a simpler hierarchical management model where a participant was entirely dependent on the manager's goodwill for promotion.
- **Trust in SSI and participants.** The direct managers needed to be more involved to gain trust in SSI's work and their participants. We promised confidentiality to participants as they were understandably hesitant to share their concerns otherwise. However, this meant that we could not always share information with managers and therefore could not fulfil their expectations.
- **Motivation to join RISE.** Motivation varied with some seeing it simply as a subsidised investment in their staff. Accordingly, they did not spend the funds that were expected, nor did they ensure participants engaged with enthusiasm and had the time to do so. For optimum outcomes, it is essential that all parties are committed to the project: executives, project team, managers of participants and participants.

Lastly, we note that RISE would be suitable for other marginalised groups that encounter barriers in their work environment. This is because of its purposeful design; a dual approach of working with organisations to achieve structural change and working with individuals to achieve their goals at the same time.

“The guest speakers reflected people who look like me and have walked paths I recognise. That representation changed what I believed was possible for my career.”

– RISE CEW Leaders Program participant

Key insight 5:

Leadership programs must be culturally and racially inclusive

The evidence from the CEW Leaders Program makes a compelling case: culturally and racially inclusive leadership programs are not simply a “nice to have”. They are essential to unlocking the potential of CARM women and creating genuinely equitable pathways to senior leadership.

For too long, leadership development programs have been built around a narrow and Anglo-centric model of what a leader looks and sounds like. CARM women who participated in RISE have described the transformative experience of engaging with a program that centres, rather than marginalises, their identities and experiences.

“For the first time, I was in a room where I didn’t have to translate myself. The program gave me language for experiences I’d been navigating alone for years, and showed me that my cultural background is a leadership strength, not a barrier.”

– RISE CEW Leaders Program participant

Key elements that proved most effective include the following:

Peer cohort design:

Bringing together CARM women at a similar stage of their careers created psychological safety, reduced isolation and enabled honest conversations about the specific challenges they face.

Diverse facilitation and storytelling:

Participants repeatedly cited the power of hearing from facilitators and guest speakers whose backgrounds and leadership journeys reflected their own.

Reduced financial barriers:

The decision to lower employer contribution costs for the RISE-specific cohort acknowledged that financial gatekeeping has historically limited access to high-quality leadership development.

Intentional cultural redesign:

Moving from a cosmetic review to a deep structural revision of program content signalled to participants that they belong in these spaces and that the program was built for them.

“I came into the program doubting whether I was ‘senior enough’ to be there. I left knowing not only that I belonged, *but that I have a responsibility to bring others along with me.*”

– RISE Leaders Program participant

Concluding Remarks



Intersectionality is the lens *that* *changes what we see*

The RISE project set out to do something Australian workplaces have largely avoided: apply an intersectionality lens to gender equality work in a way that takes gendered racism seriously as a structural problem and also, design an intervention bold enough to match it. What we found across 25 organisations and 360 CARM women confirms both the scale of the problem and the significance of getting the response right.

The systemic barriers that CARM women face are real, entrenched, and invisible to conventional gender equality approaches. They cannot be explained by deficit discourses: by lack of ambition, capability or confidence, or simply “culture”. They are produced by organisational systems that were never designed with CARM women in mind and sustained by leadership models, and even “diagnostic tools” and change strategies that treat race and gender as separate issues when CARM women live them simultaneously.

That is the core insight intersectionality delivers, and it is what makes the RISE findings so significant: this is not a report about adding a diversity lens to existing practice. This is a report about what becomes visible and possible when you change the lens entirely.

What makes these findings distinctive is the methodology itself. RISE did not apply intersectionality as a framing device. It operationalised it in the design of the intersectionality-informed diagnostic A2R tool, in the centring of CARM women’s voices as knowledge and evidence, in the dual macro and micro design of the project, and in the ongoing, iterative practice of the project teams.

The result is a body of knowledge about gendered racism in Australian workplaces that simply does not exist anywhere else at this scale or depth.



The implications for practitioners are clear. If your organisation is ready to move beyond good intentions and address the structural roots of gendered racism, the evidence from RISE is unambiguous about what that requires. To achieve genuine equity for CARM women, you need to:

- start with the right data, collected in the right way.
- build racial literacy before you can build intersectional literacy.
- ensure CARM women not just in the room but in the decisions.
- importantly, understand that this work is not a project with a start and end date, it is a practice, cyclical, responsive, and requiring sustained leadership commitment.

Critically, you need to resource it with real budget, dedicated time, and sustained organisational commitment that signal that this work is a strategic priority, not an afterthought.

RISE has shown what is possible when organisations are willing to do the harder, more nuanced gender equality work. The question now is whether the sector has the institutional courage to move beyond symbolic gender inclusion and do the structural work that CARM women have always needed.

Appendices

Who was behind the project?

RISE was developed and overseen by an expert team of predominantly CARM women from three consortium partners. The partnership ensured we had a diverse range of lived experiences and practical expertise.

RISE was led by three consortium partners



Diversity Council Australia (DCA) is the nation's leading independent peak body for diversity and inclusion. DCA is a member-based not-for-profit, with a strong network of almost 1,300 member organisations, including some of Australia's largest employers. For 40 years, it has been at the forefront of helping shape more equitable workplaces, contributing to a stronger economy and fairer society. DCA was responsible for managing and evaluating RISE, and providing expertise on workplace inclusion, organisational change, race and intersectionality.



Settlement Services International is a community organisation and social business that supports Australians to achieve their full potential. SSI works with culturally and linguistically diverse communities to build capacity and enable them to overcome inequality. It has a strong focus on the advancement of women, with a notable female leadership team. For the RISE project, SSI provided cultural responsiveness training to organisations and extensive support to CARM women middle managers, coordinating the coaching and mentoring services that participants received.



Chief Executive Women brings together 1,400+ of Australia's most senior women leaders to build powerful networks and develop the next generation through world-class programs and scholarships. CEW also drives evidence-based advocacy that benefits all women. It runs the CEW Leaders Program, a bespoke development program encouraging women leaders to truly be themselves, which was offered to RISE participants.

Our project team had extensive lived and work experiences. The RISE team was made up of 8 women from DCA, SSI and CEW.

Team Member

Experience

Dr Virginia Mapedzahama

*RISE Project
Lead, DCA*

Virginia is DCA's Racial Equity and Intersectionality Director. She is a first-generation Black African migrant woman and a critical race Black feminist scholar in the broader field of sociology of difference.

Her research interest is in understanding the social construction of all categories of difference. She explores subjective experiences of race, racism and ethnicity, migration, diaspora, Blackness and Black subjectivities, sexuality, hybridity, intersectionality and gendered violence.

Virginia has published extensively in these areas as well as in the broader fields of cross-cultural identities, African feminisms, post-colonial feminisms, the new African diaspora in Australia and the African women diaspora. She has a PhD in Sociology and is an Adjunct Professor at Charles Darwin University.

Shalani Tharumanathan

*Senior Project
Manager, DCA*

Shalani is a senior project manager and diversity, equity, and inclusion strategist with over 20 years of experience leading social impact initiatives, particularly focused on the evaluation and measurement of outcomes. She brings a diverse professional background, including early career experience in engineering and the design of state-of-the-art industrial telecommunication solutions. Through the Teach for Australia Leadership Development Program, Shalani went on to champion equity in education as a STEM educator in low-socioeconomic communities for three years. Her research and practice now centre on inclusive workplace design through an intersectional lens, racial equity, and organisational capability-building. In addition to her professional work, she volunteers as a teacher supporting communities from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and actively champions pathways for girls in STEM. She is the recipient of multiple Best Executive Awards and a CEO Merit Award from Telekom Malaysia.

Deborah Wu

*Senior Project
Manager, DCA*

Deborah specialises in intersectional gender equality. She aims to bridge the gap between research and practice through evidence-based training and resources. Before joining RISE, Deborah was Research & Education Manager at DCA. As a Gender Equality Advisor at Women's Health East, she advised organisations on the implementation of the Victorian *Gender Equality Act 2020*. Deborah was also Inclusion & Diversity Lead for the Victorian Local Governance Association and held roles in state and federal government.

Saumya Joshi

*Project Officer,
DCA*

Saumya supports the advancement of workplace inclusion and leadership for CARM women. She has recently completed her Juris Doctor at the University of Sydney and is working towards her legal career alongside her work at DCA.

Saumya has over 6 years of experience in volunteer roles at community legal centres and in global face-to-face fundraising, grounding her work in community-led advocacy and access to justice.

**Juliana
Nkrumah AM**

*RISE Project
Lead, SSI*

Juliana is SSI's Manager, Gender Equality and Women's Safety. Her work experience in gender equality and women's human rights spans more than 30 years, including civil society organisation (CSO) activism at the national, regional and global levels.

Juliana has a deep commitment to empowering refugee and migrant women, especially giving access to spaces where they can express their voices. This resulted in the founding of African Women Australia. She also led Australia's response to female genital mutilation (FGM) and continues to train people on FGM from a human rights angle.

Juliana won the 2023 Human Rights Medal from the Australian Human Rights Commission.

**Dr Astrid
Perry OAM**

*RISE Project
Management
lead, SSI*

Astrid is SSI's Head of Women and Gender Equity, where she is leading the implementation of the Women and Girls Strategic Plan. She has developed several projects relating to domestic and family violence, which she is passionate about addressing. Her aim is to improve outcomes for women, especially refugees and migrants.

Astrid has held numerous positions on advisory councils such as NSW Working Women's Centre, Department of Human Services National Multicultural Reference Group and Australian Multicultural Women's Association.

Astrid has a PhD in Sociology; her thesis focused on gender equity and education of girls. She brings years of leadership experience in the multicultural and women sectors to RISE. She has lived experience as an adult migrant from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

Astrid won the 2025 NSW Premier's Award for Lifetime Achievement for her work with migrant and refugee women.



Team Member

Experience

Nata Bagshaw

*Project Officer,
SSI*

Nata has over 19 years of experience in finance and economics, gained across the government and corporate sectors. After moving to Australia in 2013, she restarted a professional career in customer service, building strong people-focused skills along the way.

As a migrant, Nata has a genuine appreciation of the challenges faced by people from non-English-speaking backgrounds and approaches her work with empathy and cultural awareness. In 2023, Nata joined SSI to support Ukrainian refugees and later became part of RISE. She has a Master of Economics and Finance.

Sarah Rowley

CEW

Sarah runs the Leadership Development Practice at CEW, where she has written and delivers 2 programs for C-suite and executive women. These focus on executive readiness, and gravitas and executive presence.

Sarah has worked with more than 1,000 clients from ASX companies. Her coaching helps executives rethink, reframe and reconnect with their own thoughts, ideas, hopes and aspirations. Using her significant leadership experience across retail, pharmaceuticals, IT and non-profits, she can make meaningful connections between individual coaching and organisational goals.

Sarah has a Master of Relationship Therapy and credentials from coaching organisations such as the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership, and CBT Australia. She is also a member of several counselling and psychotherapy bodies in Australia and the UK.

How were the project teams formed?

The organisational pathway was designed to support the 25 participating organisations to identify the systemic barriers that restrict CARM women from reaching executive leadership positions within their organisations, as well as design and deliver effective change interventions. To do this effectively, organisations engaged in the steps below to set up the project at the macro level.

Each organisation set up an internal project team

When RISE began, each organisation identified an internal project team to drive the project. We encouraged the inclusion of CARM women on these teams so their voices could be centred.

The project team also typically had:

- staff from a relevant employee resource group (ERG) or similar (e.g. a culture and race ERG)
- D&I, HR or people and culture (P&C) practitioners
- a senior executive sponsor or champion.

Team members were responsible for key activities, including working with CARM women to:

- design and drive the organisation's action plan based on the findings of the ASSESS to RISE organisational diagnostic tool and DCA's Centring Marginalised Voices at Work framework
- implement relevant change interventions
- evaluate outcomes and next steps for the organisation.

CARM women middle managers were recruited as RISE participants

Each internal project team then identified and confirmed the participation of up to 15 CARM women from the organisation's middle management.

What we mean by CARM women in middle management

CARM women in middle management refers to those up to 4 levels below the chief executive officer (CEO-4).

However, given the lack of CARM women at this level of leadership in Australian organisations, lower levels of management were included if the organisation did not have, or could not recruit, 15 middle managers who were CARM women.

What is the *ASSESS to RISE* organisational diagnostic tool?

ASSESS to RISE (A2R) is an evidence-based self-assessment tool specifically designed to help participating organisations better understand:



systemic barriers holding back CARM women from rising into leadership in their workplace



the actions they can take to address these systemic barriers and ensure CARM women can rise into leadership.

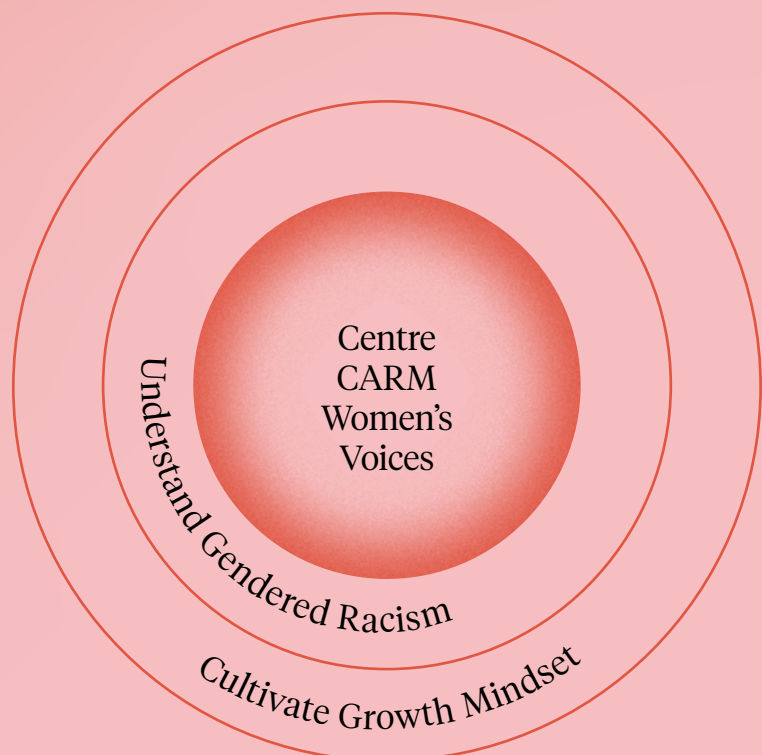
A2R focuses on gendered racism and centres voice

The A2R tool has a unique focus on 3 defining outcomes for organisations so they can:

1. centre CARM women's voices
2. understand and focus on gendered racism
3. cultivate a growth mindset.

For the RISE project, we intended the tool to be completed by:

- each organisation's internal project team
- any CARM women working in the organisation – particularly the 15 CARM women in middle management who were RISE participants.

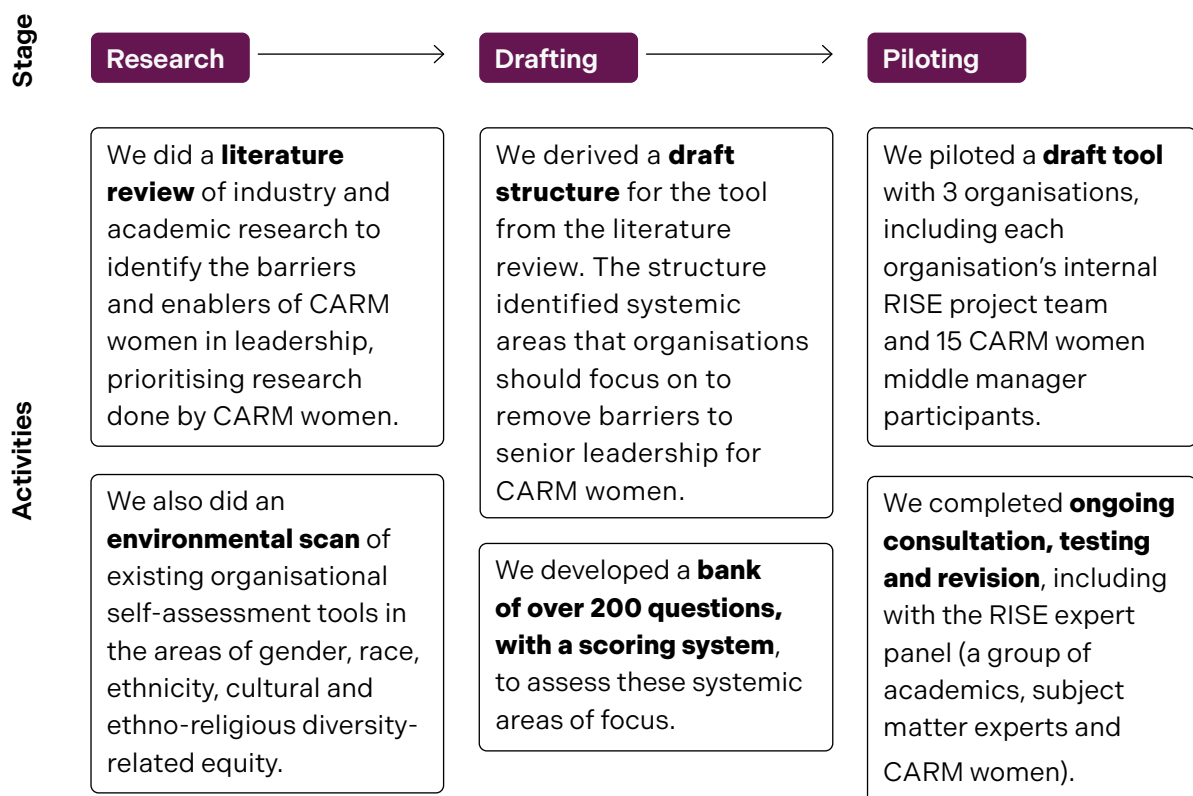




A growth mindset describes organisations that saw RISE as a learning opportunity, where they could challenge and stretch their thinking about, and their approach to, race and gender and how they intersect at work.

The tool is based on research and testing

We developed the A2R tool using an evidence-based design that centred CARM women's voices. Development stages included:



Appendix 3:

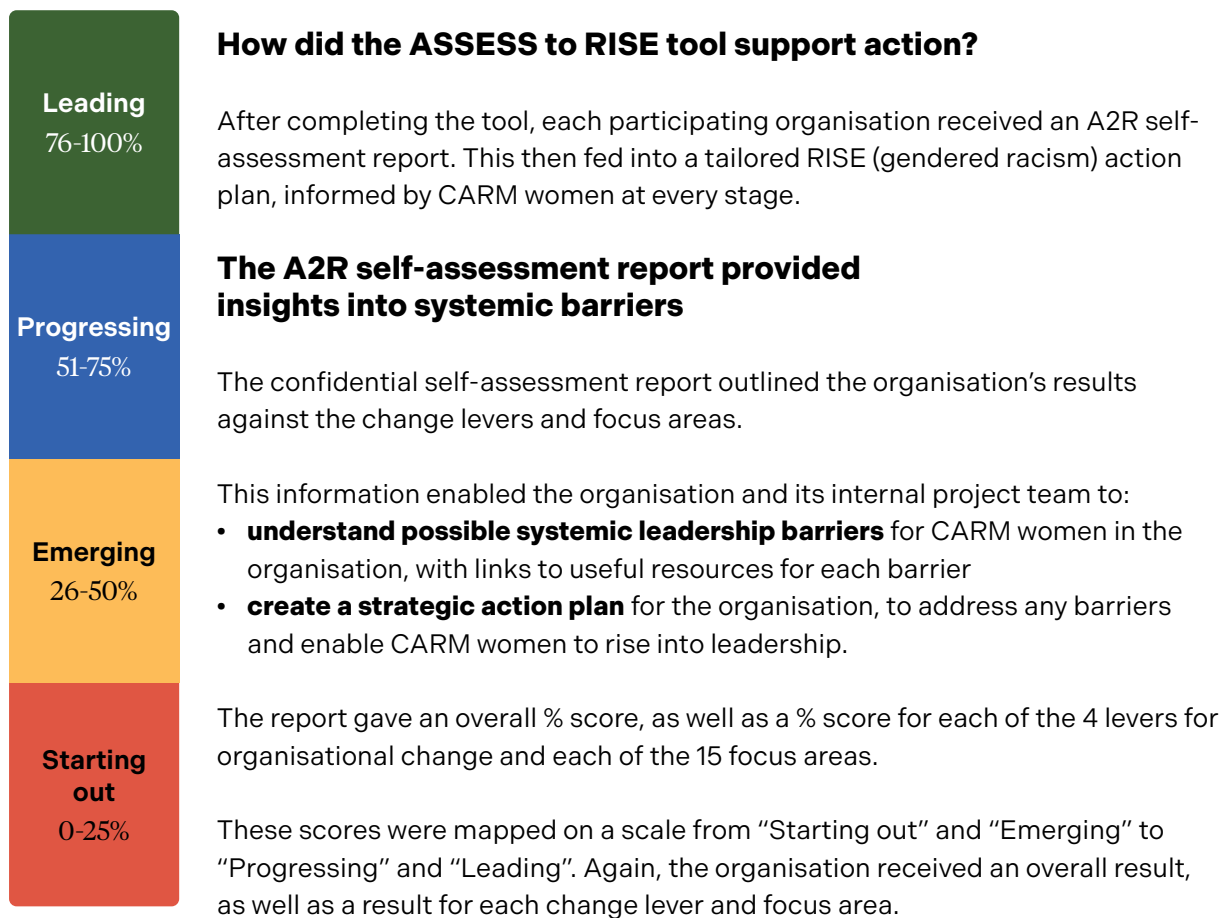
An organisation can assess 4 change levers

The A2R tool has 4 change levers:

1. Understanding gendered racism
2. Organisational culture
3. Intersectional policies & processes
4. Impact.

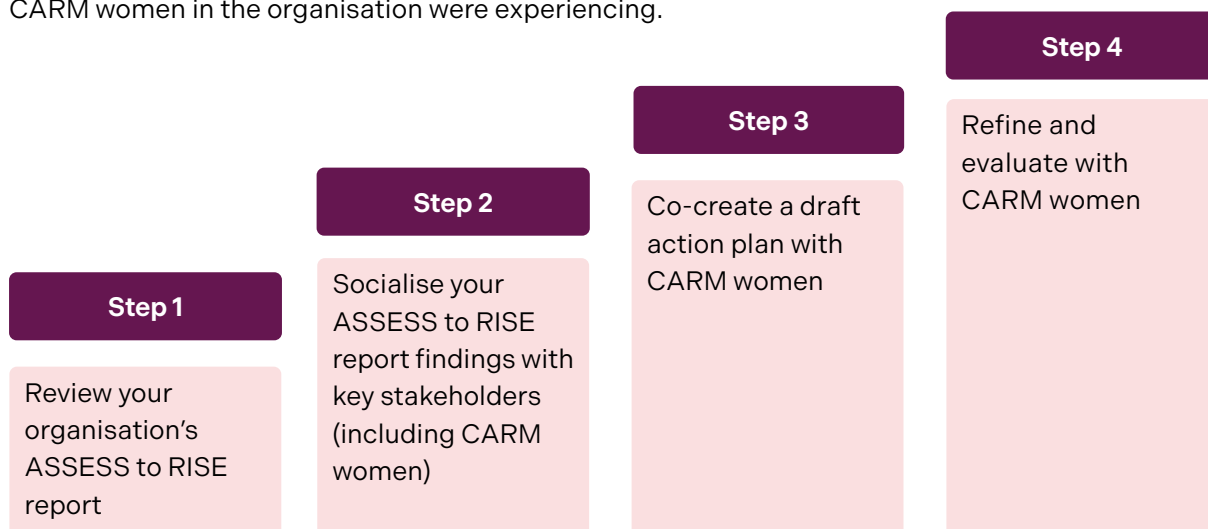
Under each change lever are 3 or 4 focus areas, which provide more targeted insights.





The next focus was an organisational action plan

Each participating organisation committed to creating its own RISE (gendered racism) action plan. This outlined the actions it would take over 12 months to address any systemic leadership barriers that CARM women in the organisation were experiencing.



How did we centre the voices of CARM women?

We encouraged each organisation to follow a 4-step process to develop its action plan, starting with the A2R report. We also offered advisory support along the way. During the RISE project, organisations used a key DCA framework for collaboration. We also ran dedicated sessions where CARM women help to shape change interventions.

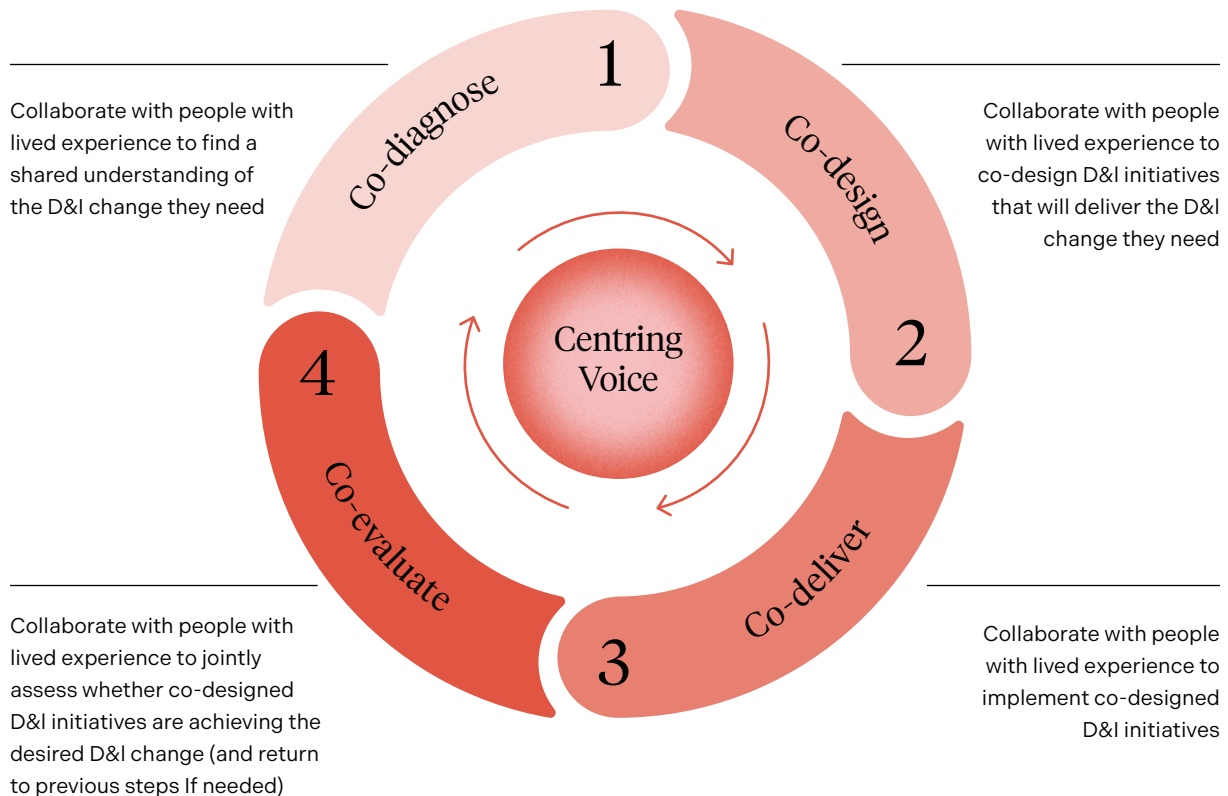
We applied DCA's Centring Marginalised Voices at Work framework

Given that RISE was a self-determination project committed to centring the voices of CARM women, it followed that almost all of the participating organisations applied DCA's Centring Marginalised Voices at Work framework.²⁰

DCA's framework offers a 4-step collaborative process:²¹

- 1 **Co-diagnose:** collaborate with people with lived experience to find a shared understanding of the D&I change they need
- 2 **Co-design:** collaborate with people with lived experience to co-design D&I initiatives that will deliver the D&I change they need
- 3 **Co-deliver:** collaborate with people with lived experience to implement co-designed D&I initiatives
- 4 **Co-evaluate:** collaborate with people with lived experience to jointly assess whether the co-designed D&I initiatives are achieving the desired D&I change (and return to the previous steps if needed).

Our Four-Step Collaborative Process



Centring Voice sessions enabled collaboration

Once each organisation had received its ASSESS to RISE report, we ran Centring Voice sessions with CARM women participants.

During these sessions, CARM women:

- co-reviewed the systemic barriers identified in the A2R report to better understand the state of play
- shaped the organisation's change strategies by co-designing the action plan that prioritised the identified barriers and set out the interventions.

As RISE progressed, CARM women also:

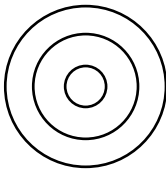
- co-delivered change initiatives
- co-evaluated change impacts
- redirected implementation processes as needed.

The result of this process was a fit-for-purpose action plan that addressed the prioritised systemic barriers, reflected the needs of CARM women and aligned with the business and strategic interests of the organisation.

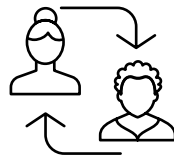
We designed the Centring Voice sessions with care to prioritise CARM women's racial safety and psychological safety. The DCA team co-facilitated these sessions, providing subject matter expertise and case studies where required.

How did we build practitioner capability?

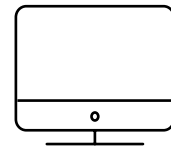
Practitioner capability (specifically and importantly, relating to racial literacy and intersectionality literacy) significantly shapes how effectively organisations address gendered racism. The RISE project applied three learning and development strategies to build practitioner capability:



Targeted sessions by intersectionality experts



Peer-to-peer learning
A virtual learning and



resource platform:
the RISE Hub.

Targeted sessions discussed racial and intersectionality literacy

The RISE project team used sessions with key organisational stakeholders to build intersectionality literacy. These included community of practice (CoP) sessions, project introductions, ASSESS to RISE debriefs, DCA Anti-Racism at Work training, SSI Cultural Responsiveness training and regular check-ins.

Sessions covered themes such as:

- what the difference is between race, ethnicity and culture, and why understanding this is important in ensuring inclusion in all 3 diversity dimensions
- who CARM women are and why we use this

term throughout the project

- what gendered racism is and how it shows up in policies, processes and practices
- what race, racism and anti-racism are
- how intersectionality can be applied to D&I work to ensure inclusion of people who sit at the intersection of diversity silos.

Peer-to-peer learning focused on shared insights and leading practice

Through peer-to-peer learning opportunities, RISE practitioners shared, studied and experimented with emerging organisational design principles and cultural change strategies that are inclusive for staff who experience compounded forms of marginalisation.

Peer-to-peer opportunity	Description
Community of practice (CoP) sessions	The RISE project team hosted CoP sessions every six to eight weeks to feature questions, topics, concerns or leading practice case studies that emerged from check-in meetings with organisations. CoP sessions provided a platform for practitioners to share leading practice or strategies that have led to improved inclusion for CARM women. Themes included: • building racial and intersectional literacy to remove systemic barriers • operationalising intersectionality in practice and translating concepts into concrete actions that improve inclusion • developing and implementing organisational action plans, including setting priorities, introducing interventions and tracking outcomes • embedding the Centring Marginalised Voices at Work framework across the full cycle: diagnose, design, deliver and evaluate • using sponsorship and mentorship as key enablers for CARM women's access to leadership pathways • applying the Racial Dignity Framework as a foundation for designing inclusion for racially marginalised staff members²² • using ethical storytelling practices that centre the needs of the storyteller when building awareness.²³
Ongoing advisory sessions	The DCA project team met with organisations fortnightly for the first 6 months, then monthly for the remaining 12 months. These sessions streamlined project implementation across all 25 organisations and provided opportunities for practitioners to discuss and seek advice on different elements of the project, from planning to evaluation. Given the limited body of literature on addressing gendered racism in Australian workplaces, learning was primarily informed by DCA's emerging research and published guidelines. Sharing leading-practice case studies from organisations that have seen positive outcomes from their initiatives also supported organisations with their own change interventions.

The RISE Hub provides ongoing access to resources

The RISE Hub is a virtual resource platform for RISE participants and project teams. It hosts a variety of information to support organisations on their journey. The hub includes:

- recordings of online CoP and networking events
- project timelines
- action plan templates and supporting resources
- password-protected links to progress trackers and participant trackers for each organisation.

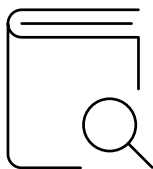
The RISE Hub enabled participants to learn more about the topics we discussed during the project and to catch up on events in their own time. It will be accessible indefinitely.

How did our participant pathway work?

The second stream in the RISE approach was a participant pathway with two suites of offerings: one universally accessible and one individually tailored. Both were informed by 5 guiding principles to enable career advancement for CARM women.

Research identified principles and activities to benefit CARM women

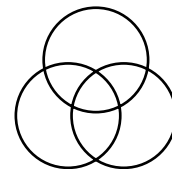
The SSI team was keen to base the participant pathway on research findings about the strategies that are most beneficial for career advancement. It engaged the Institute for Public Policy and Governance from UTS to gather research and compile recommendations, which involved:



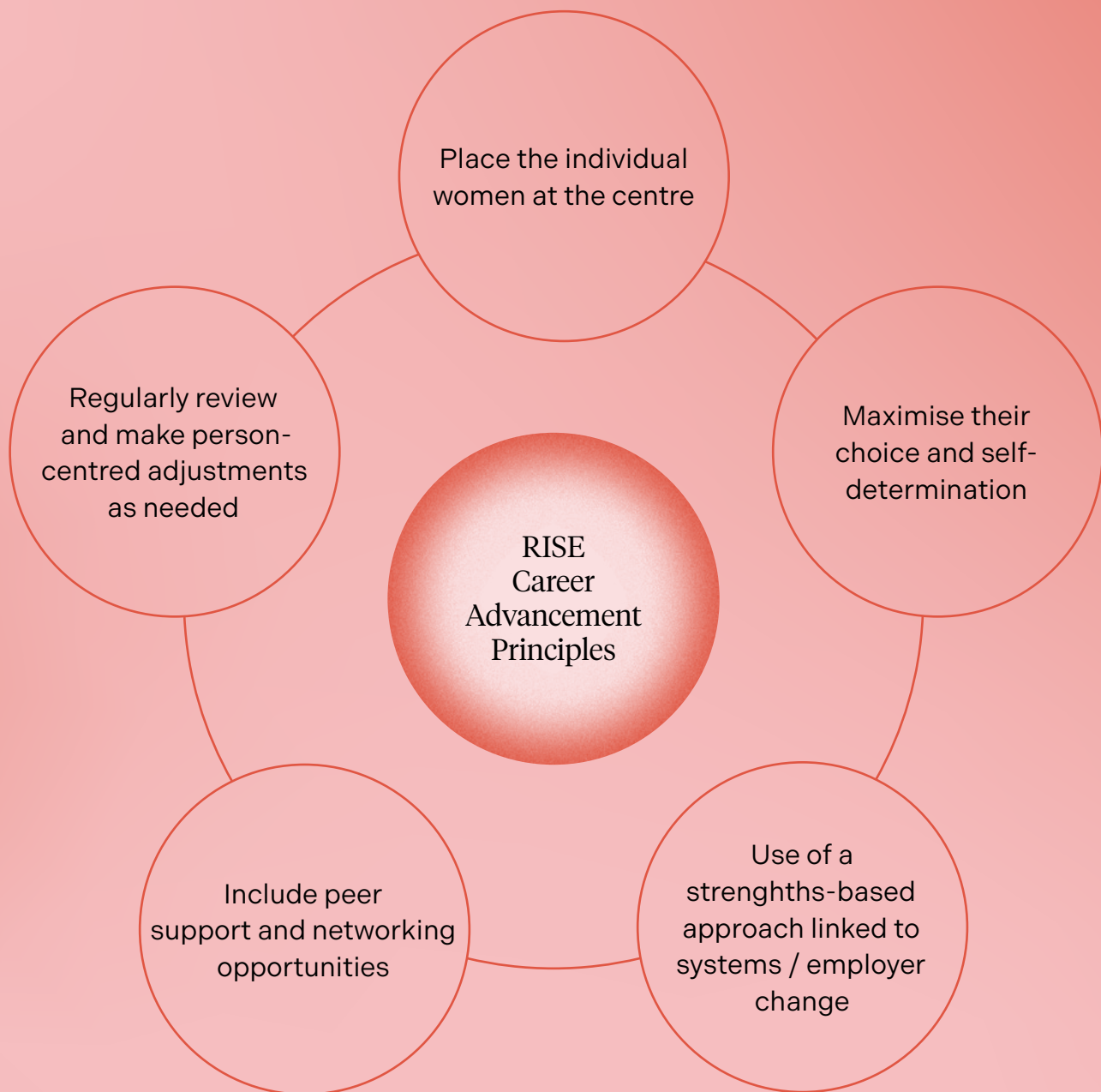
a targeted desktop review
of literature, with findings analysed and submitted in a separate discovery paper



a targeted stakeholder engagement program
involving in-depth interviews and focus groups with 18 CARM women



three co-design workshops
with RISE project partner representatives, plus a final half-day session, also involving CARM women participants, to discuss a draft support model.



The UTS researchers recommended that the CARM support model be driven by five core principles:

1. Place the individual women at the centre.
2. Maximise their choice and self-determination.
3. Use a strengths-based approach linked to systems/employer change.
4. Include peer support and networking opportunities.
5. Regularly review and make person-centred adjustments as needed.

The research also identified 10 potential components for each participant's career advancement package. A RISE participant could choose to engage in only some of these, but it was assumed that most would receive, and be actively involved, in five activities:

1. self-assessment tool
2. individualised career advancement plan
3. employer sponsor
4. coordinated mentoring/coaching
5. networking and peer support.

Appendix 6:

CARM women participants had access to two suites of offerings

We worked collaboratively to identify two suites of offerings for the CARM women participants. The first was a universal set of activities that all the women could access. The second suite built on this and was individually tailored based on each participant's needs. Availability for individually tailored activities was generally limited to one per woman with some ad-hoc support.

Suite of offerings	Activities
Universally accessible	• One-to-one conversation with project lead • Langley strengths profile • Accredited debrief of strengths profile • Career advancement plan • Networking events • Online resources
Individually tailored	• Mentoring • Coaching • Negotiating sponsorship • Preparing for interviews and appraisals • Dealing with workplace challenges • CEW Leaders Program

The universal suite offered a chronological pathway

First, we made a series of chronological activities accessible to everyone:

- Each participant had a **one-to-one conversation** with the SSI project lead, which was transcribed for later analysis. This conversation helped to illuminate the woman's situation, fears, frustrations and hopes.
- We encouraged each participant to complete the [Langley strengths profile](#), which is based on positive psychology and applies particularly to the work context.
- We then offered a **debrief of the strength profile** by an accredited professional. This was key to identifying whether the participant's occupation and position were well suited to their strengths or whether they could optimise their performance by using their unrealised strengths.
- The debrief influenced the **career advancement plan**, which was drafted by the participant and finalised with the SSI project lead.
- The **career advancement plan** named the strengths the CARM woman wanted to utilise more so. It also had a five-year career goal they wanted to achieve, and a related 12-month goal divided into three or four achievable goals for the year. The participant kept notes on their progress. The idea was that the small goals would contribute to the 12-month goal, which in turn would contribute to the five-year goal.

The career advancement plan informed individual activities

Each participant's career advancement plan informed their individual activities. They worked with the SSI project lead to choose the best activity options, which were then put forward to their organisation's project team.

Once 60% of the organisation's participants had recommendations, the SSI team called a meeting with the organisation to discuss which action it was prepared to support. RISE was able to fund four participants for 6 mentoring sessions for each organisation. If more sessions or participants needed to be supported, the organisation had to contribute extra funds. This was possible for most organisations.

Coaching was recommended in isolated cases only, usually for quite senior staff. It had some small extra costs, compared with mentoring, and organisations funded these.

Mentors and coaches were matched to participants

It was important that mentors and coaches were matched well with participants, according to their wishes. Most participants wanted a CARM mentor, often one that was experienced in their own field or at their level. For some, the industry was more important. For others, the cultural and racial background took precedence. For others still, a mentor or coach had to be able to show them how Australians would approach the issues they grappled with.

SSI engaged mentors and coaches who were known to different SSI staff or recommended by the community, other coaches and mentors, or the RISE expert panel. The SSI project leads interviewed them all to ensure they were a good fit with the project.

To ensure mentors and coaches were consistent and met minimum standards, SSI also developed an e-learning tool. Each mentor and coach was asked to develop a brief plan to address the participant's interests and then submit a report at the end of the sessions.

Many mentors and coaches were paid as contractors, but some wanted to invest in CARM women by volunteering. Most of our matches were successful and only a few participants needed a different mentor or coach to be allocated.

Tailored support – a response to individual needs

Sponsorship was recommended for many participants, especially those that were more advanced in their careers, as a result of their career advancement goals. They were coached on how to choose and approach a sponsor. Companies were also encouraged to set up a formal sponsorship system. Some organisations had systems in place, but they were difficult to access for CARM women as their potential was not necessarily perceived. There is no doubt that a successful sponsor relationship has significant impacts on CARM women's careers. For RISE to focus on sponsorship more extensively, we would have needed more resources.

CARM women participants were also offered support in preparation for performance appraisals, job interviews, promotional interviews, reviews of resumes and job applications and analysis of job descriptions, on a needs basis.

How did networking events support participants?

We held a range of networking events to build skills and knowledge, validate experiences and help participants on the RISE journey.

“It was very affirming hearing other CARM women's stories and experiences in workplaces, *I don't think these conversations would have come to light without RISE being the conduit for the conversations to occur.*”

Online events included guest speakers, fireside chats and training

Due to the dispersed audience across four states, we held most networking events online, with one every six weeks on average. Events were designed to inspire, offer a learning experience, build skills and, most of all, affirm the experiences many participants were having at work.

We had guest speakers, fireside chats and training to respond to the needs of diverse groups. We considered both the challenges participants experienced and their level of leadership. Attendance at networking events was high with an average of 92 women

attending per session, which was particularly pleasing as organisations were onboarded in three consecutive phases.

In-person networking events examined shared experiences

We held five in-person networking events—in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane—for organisational project teams and participants. The events focused on getting to know each other, understanding the RISE cohorts and sharing different career journeys. Our goal was to validate the experiences of participants and allow project teams to reflect on those experiences.

Some key events were:

A court of testimony



Sydney



4 Panellists

One of our two Sydney events staged a court of testimony with eight participants giving testimony and four judges (panellists). It involved Anna Cody, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, and Sharmilla Bargon, Director of the NSW Women's Legal Centre.

The audience and judges heard experiences of people being marginalised or bullied, lacking career progression and feeling invisible. The judges provided a "verdict" on what they had heard, setting out rights, policies, practices and legislation that employers should have heeded in their approach. Significantly, these experiences were linked not only to current employers, but also past employers and the migration experience.

Bearing witness



Melbourne



70 Attendees

Our first Melbourne event saw a selection of participants and project leads bearing witness by sharing their journey and the learnings they would take away from participating in RISE. They shared their hopes for a better future and their ideas for improvements to better promote CARM women and pave the way for those who follow. 70 participants and project team members attended.

A lived experience interview



Melbourne



40 Attendees

The second Melbourne event occurred towards the end of the project and attracted over 40 attendees. It used a lived experience interview to explore what racism in the workplace feels like.

Attendees then formed smaller groups to discuss what they had heard and the benefits of RISE. Sharing these insights with the whole group was humbling and inspiring. So much positive change had happened to make participants be truly seen by their employers.

Conversation on racism



Brisbane



34 Attendees

Our Brisbane event, attended by 34 participants and project team members, included the Race Discrimination Commissioner, Giridharan Sivaraman as guest speaker, to encourage sharing of participants' insights of their own experiences. They attested to their progress on their career journey to the learnings from RISE. What stood out from this event was the increase of self-confidence that many raised as a key element making the difference to their personal career efforts.

What did the CEW Leaders Program offer participants?

One of the individual activities available on the participant pathway was involvement in the CEW Leaders Program. CEW worked with the other RISE partners to tailor this program for CARM women.

Redesigned Leaders Program embedded inclusion for CARM women

The standard CEW Leaders Program builds leadership capacity and provides opportunities for networking and membership connections. When participants complete the program, they are invited to join the CEW Connect community.

For RISE, the potential benefits of this program were clear, but we knew it needed to be culturally inclusive to truly support CARM women. A critical insight that emerged early was that delivering a culturally inclusive program required more than surface-level adjustments. So in early 2024, CEW went through a rigorous exercise with the RISE team – it reviewed its Leaders Program content and materials to ensure the program was genuinely appropriate and affirming for CARM women.

This exercise revised key elements of the program, including:

- wording, to remove culturally narrow or exclusionary framing
- imagery, to ensure diverse and representative visuals
- activity set-up and delivery, to be inclusive of varied cultural contexts and experiences
- guest speakers, to integrate a diverse range of stories and leadership backgrounds.

The outcome of this process was the Leaders Program Version 3.0, launched in 2024–25. It provided an elevated framework that embedded a strong and intentional lens on cultural and racial inclusion throughout, rather than treating it as an add-on. This version was informed directly by feedback from the RISE team and was built to reflect the intersectional experiences of CARM women as a core, not peripheral, dimension of leadership development.



Many CARM women
held roles more than
4 levels below C-suite

Making them
previously ineligible for
the CEW Leaders Program

The program extended its reach to benefit more CARM women leaders

The standard CEW Leaders Program is designed for leaders at CEO-2 to CEO-4 level with 5 or more years of experience. This meant that one of our most significant challenges was an eligibility gap. Many CARM women participating in the RISE project held roles more than 4 levels below the C-suite, placing them outside the standard eligibility criteria.

Rather than viewing this as a barrier, CEW reframed it as an opportunity to extend the program's reach and better serve women earlier in their leadership journeys. In 2025, CEW proposed a RISE-specific Leaders Program, a standalone cohort separate from CEW's regular calendar.

Factor	Standard CEW Leaders Program	RISE-specific Leaders Program
Eligibility	Open to CEO-2 to CEO-4 with 5+ years of experience	Open to CARM women earlier in their leadership journey
Timing	Part of CEW's annual calendar	A standalone, dedicated cohort program
Employer contribution	\$3,500 + GST	\$2,500 + GST (to encourage endorsement)
Participants	Broad leadership audience	Peer cohort of women at a similar career stage
Content	Existing program content	Curated selection of the most high-impact Leaders Program content

The RISE-specific program ran for three days and brought together a cohort of participants from across RISE organisations. The program represented a significant step in making the transformational content of the CEW Leaders Program accessible to women who have historically been excluded from such opportunities due to where they sit in organisational hierarchies.

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