



# Chief Executive Women

Women leaders enabling all women



## Unlocking Leadership:

Conversations on Gender  
*and* Race in Corporate  
Australia

2023



**Intersection**

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## **Unlocking Leadership: Conversations on Gender and Race in Corporate Australia**

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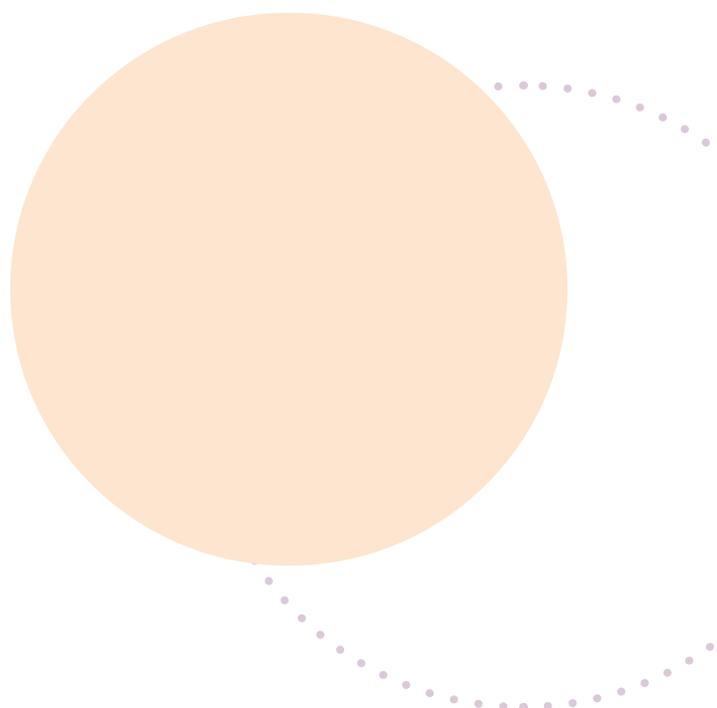
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We respect and honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future. We acknowledge the stories, traditions and living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on this land and commit to building a brighter future together.



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## Message from CEW

“Culturally diverse women leaders are a force to be reckoned with. With Australia facing a challenging economic climate and critical workforce shortages, businesses need to tap into a full talent pool and culturally diverse women are one of the greatest untapped resources in Australian business.”

**Dr Marlene Kanga AO**  
Project Steering Committee Member



“Racially diverse women leaders face a double-glazed ceiling, experiencing barriers because of their gender AND race. It’s time for leaders to talk about race in Australian workplaces and take action.”

**Susan Lloyd-Hurwitz**  
President, CEW



## Diverse leadership is good for business

Chief Executive Women’s (CEW) core purpose is “women leaders empowering all women”. CEW members, as business and community leaders, strive to realise a vision that sees diverse women leaders at every decision-making table.

The case for change is clear: diverse leadership is good for business. It delivers enhanced performance, stronger innovation, and increased retention.

By increasing female participation in the workforce, we will address the critical economic and societal issues facing Australia today, for the benefit of everyone.

Australia has made advances in workplace gender equality and is a world leader in collecting gender equality data. Over the past six years, CEW has tracked the representation of women in senior leadership teams in Australia’s top public companies through our annual [CEW Senior Executive Census](#).

This Census has demonstrated that while progress towards gender balanced leadership has been made, it has been at a slow rate. There are still several challenges we need to address to achieve equal representation in all parts of society.

Importantly, we know that a discussion on how to deliver gender equality without applying an intersectional lens can limit our ability to harness the full potential that exists today to increase the representation of women in leadership.

There are culturally and racially diverse women, First Nations women, women with a disability, people of marginalised genders and sexualities, and women with low socio-economic status who experience multiple, diverse, and intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Treating women as a uniform cohort often comes at the expense of these women.

## Leaders need to talk about women and race

In this report we have chosen to explore the experiences and voices of culturally and racially diverse women in senior leadership roles in Australia's ASX300 companies. We have identified opportunities to address the challenges these women face, or have faced, to forge a better pathway for women leaders.

Unfortunately, Australian statistics relating to culturally and racially diverse women in leadership are limited, and any conversations about race in Australian workplaces are often challenging. We need to have honest and open conversations about race, and create safe spaces for the disclosure and collection of data, if we are to make progress in this area.

To inform this report, we asked culturally and racially diverse women leaders to share the challenges they have faced in their leadership journey and to underscore some of the positive and negative factors that impacted them along the way. We also sought their advice on what actions others can take to help unlock diverse talent.

This report includes several actions that can be taken to help address some of the challenges and maximise the opportunities to deliver more diverse and inclusive workplaces.

## Accessing the full talent pool is crucial right now

The case for change has never been greater. Australia is facing a difficult economic climate and critical workforce shortages. If we can harness the full talent pool within Australian workplaces, we can help address these challenges quickly.

We know that Australia has one of the most [well-educated female workforces](#) in the world. [CEW research](#) has found that engaging Australian women in paid work at the same rate as men could unlock an additional one million full-time skilled workers with post-school qualifications. If we can provide a better pathway for more culturally and racially diverse women, we will maximise the

opportunity to drive productivity improvements, enhanced profitability, and open a greater employee talent pool for business – for the good of all.

## CEW's commitment to change

We extend our sincere gratitude to the culturally and racially diverse women leaders who shared their deeply personal journeys, expertise, and insights with us.

We know that, too often, the burden of educating and advocating for change falls disproportionately on diverse peoples and communities. CEW commits to critical reflection and, more importantly, to continued action towards greater diversity within gender equality in Australia to empower all women.

CEW acknowledges that we ourselves are on a journey, and we need to do more to ensure we represent all women leaders in our membership and in our organisation. We recognise that we must increase diversity, including the representation of culturally and racially diverse women, across our organisation.

We are committed to living our stated value of having diverse women leaders at every decision-making table and will adopt this report's recommendations in full. We have started gathering data across our membership, and will work towards setting meaningful targets to drive greater diversity within our organisation.

We invite business leaders to join us on this journey towards genuinely diverse gender equality in Australia.

The experience of First Nations women leaders has not been included in this report. CEW consulted with our First Nations members, and they identified the need for separate engagement and research. A specific focus is necessary to reflect the impacts of colonising practices, intergenerational trauma, and the historical and current racism experienced by First Nations women in Australia.

# Executive Summary

CEW advocates for a world where there are diverse women leaders at every decision-making table. In the past decade, progress towards gender balance in the executive leadership of ASX300 companies – while slow – is visible. Progress towards cultural and racial diversity representative of the Australian population has not even been measured.

This report elevates the experiences of culturally and racially diverse women in senior leadership roles across Australia's ASX300 companies. Through in-depth qualitative engagement with 27 culturally diverse women leaders, supported by a review of relevant literature, we have found that:

## 1. Leaders need to talk about gender *and* race in corporate Australia

Over time, Australian organisations and leaders have become more experienced and comfortable discussing gender equity. In contrast, talking about race remains largely taboo in corporate Australia.

## 2. Culturally and racially diverse women can bring unique and valuable expertise

Australia is failing to tap into the full talent pool. Organisations with better representation of culturally and racially diverse women are better positioned to thrive in complex, global environments, and have affinity to Australian customer bases.

## 3. International experience can deliver a powerful advantage to Australian workplaces

Australian organisations are not fully valuing and leveraging leaders' previous international work experience compared to global peers.

## 4. Racial discrimination is still pervasive and is a barrier to authenticity

Sexism and racism are not historical issues. Most participants reported recent and continuing examples of discrimination and disadvantage, limiting authentic participation in the workforce.



## Take Action

There is no shortage of talented, meritorious, and capable women from culturally diverse backgrounds in Australia ready to excel in executive leadership roles. However, there is a lack of attention and leadership in addressing their underrepresentation in corporate Australia.

For Australian workplaces to unlock the potential of culturally diverse women leaders, CEW calls on leaders and corporations to:

- **Lead a conversation about cultural and racial diversity**

Intersectional diversity should be an organisational priority, not confined to a single department or team. Leaders should develop their understanding of intersectionality, and create the space for new conversations about cultural and racial diversity.

- **Role model curiosity and engage in self-reflection**

Leaders and allies can role model curiosity and a learning mindset, in consultation with the workforce, while acknowledging any mistakes and committing to self-improvement. However, we caution leaders against placing the burden of cultural responsibility on culturally and racially diverse people.

- **Gather data, set goals, measure progress, and hold leaders to account**

Data and targets have vastly improved the representation of women in corporate Australia. Now is the time to build on that success, improve data gathering, and work towards setting organisational targets for cultural and racial diversity. Boards and executives should regularly track progress and communicate outcomes.

- **Actively invest in sponsorship**

Sponsorship is highly effective in building the talent pipeline. Leaders should seek opportunities to sponsor culturally and racially diverse women, and lead executive teams to do the same.

- **Build culturally safe workplaces and break down systemic barriers**

Examine organisational policies and practices (particularly in relation to recruitment and progression processes), assess cultural and racial safety, and take action. Reorganise social and networking events to ensure inclusion, and create opportunities for cultural exchanges and celebrations of religious and significant cultural days.



# Introduction

While there has been extensive research and action over the past two decades on creating more gender equal workplaces, it has tended to treat women as a homogenous group with benefits more readily flowing to women from the dominant White population. This report comes at a time when a more nuanced conversation on gender equality is emerging, both within Australian companies and at the broader societal level.

In this report, the intersection of race and gender is examined in the context of corporate leadership to understand what has worked well and what can be done better to further promote diverse and inclusive workplaces.

Recent reports from the Diversity Council of Australia<sup>1</sup> and CDW and MindTribes<sup>2</sup> have highlighted the need for a different approach to ensure culturally and racially diverse women have greater access to leadership roles. This report builds on these and other studies, focussing on the lived experience of culturally and racially diverse women leaders in Australia's ASX300 companies. It draws on CEW's membership, and provides guidance for advancing gender and racial equality in Australian workplaces. There is a clear business case for doing so. At a time when Australia faces critical workforce challenges, unleashing the productive talent of all people will drive productivity, profit, and business opportunity. The Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) has noted, for example, that:

*"Australia's Asian business diasporas are a rich source of innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurialism. Yet they are under-utilised. They have significant potential to further enhance Australia's economic engagement with Asia and help the nation's economy to thrive, for the benefit of all Australians."*<sup>3</sup>

The need for action is critical. Racism and racial discrimination still occur in Australian workplaces and limit the opportunities of many culturally and racially diverse women aspiring to leadership positions. This report is consistent with broader research findings that the experience of being both a woman and culturally and racially diverse creates multiple complexities and barriers to advancement. These intersections of race, gender, and other characteristics are often ignored or misunderstood. This report seeks to assist Australian leaders and workplaces to address these intersections, and in doing so, realise the benefits of increasingly diverse leadership teams.

In developing this report, a focus group and in-depth qualitative interviews were held with 27 culturally and racially diverse women in leadership roles, most of whom were members of, or associated with, CEW. Interviews were also undertaken with three managers of culturally and racially diverse women and three culturally and racially diverse male leaders from ASX300 and equivalent organisations. Access to these leaders provided a unique insight into the differing leadership journeys, experiences and actions that made a difference to their careers, which could be further implemented across corporate Australia.

The conversation about gender equality and cultural and racial diversity in senior leadership in Australia is relatively new. CEW intends to build on the groundwork of this qualitative research and take a more intersectional lens to the annual [CEW Senior Executive Census](#).

CEW and the Intersection research team express their deep gratitude to the inspirational leaders who generously shared their time and often deeply personal stories. The quotes used throughout this report are drawn from this engagement and are de-identified to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. It is hoped that this shared lived experience and corresponding calls to action will assist Australian workplaces to advance their efforts in addressing racial and gender equality.

Action and attention to this issue will benefit business outcomes, but this is also simply a matter of fairness.

# Terminology

## Intersectionality

Intersectionality refers to ways in which different aspects of a person's identity – such as sex, gender, class, race, ethnicity, Indigeneity, sexual orientation, religion, language, and age – can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage. It provides a more holistic lens through which we can understand each individual's experience.

For the purposes of this report, the intersection of race and gender in the context of leadership in ASX300 organisations was examined.

## Gender and sex

Throughout this document, the terms gender, sex, and women are used to improve readability.

It is recognised that gender is not binary and that culturally and racially diverse people of all genders can experience workplace discrimination. Women includes cis and trans women and non-binary people perceived as women.



## Cultural and racial diversity

To understand cultural and racial diversity requires clear language that accurately describes our society. Yet the language used in Australia, including the term “culturally and linguistically diverse”, is neither simple nor accurate. Terminology to describe women from racial, ethnic, or ethno-religious minority groups is not consistent within national or international reporting and literature, in part due to the complexity, with no single characteristic being sufficient.

In this report the term “cultural and racial diversity” was selected as best reflecting the lived experiences of those who participated in the interviews, recognising that each of these words has problems, limitations, and issues. Women interviewed for this report include women born in Australia and those from immigrant, refugee, diaspora, and expatriate populations.

Research participants experienced disadvantages, barriers, and racism resulting from the way leaders and peers reacted to their colour, accent, name, cultural practices, and different career trajectories, in addition to their gender. These different reactions merged together in multiple different ways, reflecting the different lived experience of intersectional disadvantage.

The language of “diversity” inevitably brings with it a comparison to an invisible norm

that remains unscrutinised or uncritiqued. In this report, the term “White” has been used to encapsulate this norm. While similarly contested, the descriptor of “White” more broadly captures current racial privilege when compared to terms such as “Anglo-Celtic”. Many in Australia enjoy White privilege without being Anglo-Celtic.

The language used internationally including “minority women”, “women of colour”, and “women from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds” does not reflect multicultural reality in Australia. However, this language is used in this report when referencing studies or policies that relate specifically to one particular group of women.

Finally, while it is acknowledged that culturally and racially diverse women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women likely experience many similar barriers to leadership, a clear distinction has been made following CEW’s consultation with First Nations members and their identified need for separate engagement and research. A separate focus is necessary to ensure any findings and recommendations are reflective of the impacts of colonising practices, intergenerational trauma, and the historical and current racism experienced by First Nations women in Australia.

## Cultural safety in the workplace

A culturally safe workplace is one where there is positive recognition and celebration of diversity and all identities, where values and behaviours are consistent with respect and inclusion. Such a workplace empowers people and enables them to feel safe to be themselves.

# Findings and actions

## Finding 1: Leaders need to talk about gender and race in corporate Australia

### Racism is still a taboo word in corporate Australia

Many participants said that Australian organisations simply were not talking – at all, or in open and sophisticated ways – about cultural and racial diversity. Several reflected that this research project was the first time they had been offered a formal opportunity to consider or address the issue in a professional context.<sup>4</sup>

*"This is one of the first [professional] conversations I've had about being from a different racial background – it never comes up."<sup>5</sup>*

Several participants said that, after moving to Australia for work, they were 'shocked' or 'surprised' by the lack of conversations, action and focus on racial and cultural diversity within Australian organisations.<sup>6</sup>

*"...I honestly felt like this is ... what it must've felt like in New York, working in the 80's."<sup>7</sup>*

Some participants felt that Australian organisations lacked the knowledge and language to talk about racial and cultural diversity. Leaders were often uncomfortable and apprehensive about having these discussions at all, for fear of offending others, being accused of speaking on behalf of culturally and racially diverse people, or "getting it wrong".<sup>8</sup>

By comparison, participants felt that Australia was lagging behind international peers when it came to conversations and organisational programs and action about racial and cultural diversity.<sup>9</sup> There was general consensus that organisations in the UK and US were more experienced, more comfortable, and had developed a "corporate language" for addressing

these issues in a way that Australian organisations were yet to do.

Despite these concerns, several participants reflected that they had observed a shift in recent times as issues of cultural and racial diversity became more frequently discussed in broader society and the media.<sup>10</sup>

### Discussions on race and culture are less evolved and more nuanced than those on gender and sex

As the 2022 Board Diversity Index noted, "...a focus on powerful advocacy and accelerated change is now urgently required for cultural diversity."<sup>11</sup>

Many participants contrasted this with the focus on gender diversity that corporate Australia has demonstrated for many years and noted that organisations were far more comfortable discussing gender equality and diversity than race and cultural diversity. One participant likened the current state of cultural diversity in Australian organisations to "where we were on gender 30 years ago".<sup>12</sup>

Some noted this focus on gender alone in Australian workplaces could be detrimental to the consideration of other forms of diversity – in particular, racial and cultural diversity – as women were treated as a homogenous group.<sup>13</sup>

*"They almost don't care what the women look like – but I do, as we're just replacing old white men with slightly younger White women."<sup>14</sup>*

The pervasive silence around race and cultural background in Australian workplaces can make it difficult for culturally and racially diverse women to reckon with the intersectional barriers they faced. For some participants, these interviews were the first opportunity they had been given to reflect on how their race and cultural background had impacted their experiences of the workplace.

## When leaders listen, solutions are often found within

Recent research suggests that listening to employees and acting on the results is "...by far the best predictor of excellence..." for organisations.<sup>15</sup>

*"When leaders listen and hear what diverse teams need, they understand the small things that make a difference. When we truly feel empathy, listen, hear, and respond – we are naturally inclusive and diverse as a result."*<sup>16</sup>

Staff surveys, pulse surveys, exit interviews, performance discussions, and internal employee Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) groups are important points of engagement for executive teams and Boards.

Listening effectively to people means hearing from everyone, including employees, customers, and other stakeholders from all identities.

This is expanded upon in CEW's and Champions of Change framework: *It starts with us: Casting your leadership shadow* which emphasises that impactful change starts from the top.

It is important for leaders to be aware of privilege. As the Champions of Change Coalition prompts, consider how aspects of privilege have been "greenlighting" pathways to power for some people but not others.<sup>17</sup>

## Extra sensitivity

Australia has a contentious history with racial and cultural diversity. Therefore, it is not surprising that some participants remained cautious, apprehensive, reluctant, or (in some cases) unwilling to speak about cultural and racial diversity with their peers in senior leadership roles or with Board members. Some said that in a corporate environment and at an executive level, they felt that their role was to focus on business and operational issues within their remit, and that discussing issues related to cultural diversity generally may be seen as irrelevant or outside their scope of responsibility. One participant said:

*"I reflect on: why haven't I done more? or why haven't I spoken at the executive level? .... I think it goes back to not wanting to highlight challenges or difficulties you've experienced in the past. If I say 'it's really difficult', maybe [they'll think] I'm not up for the job."*<sup>18</sup>

## Take Action:

Leaders and corporations have made strides to advance gender equality in the workplace. For Australian workplaces to proactively create conversations about cultural and racial diversity, CEW calls on leaders and corporations to:

- **Lead a conversation about cultural and racial diversity**

Intersectional diversity should be an organisational priority, not confined to a single department or team. Leaders, because of their positional power and influence, are best placed to start conversations about cultural and racial diversity. Leaders should develop an understanding of intersectionality, build the psychological safety for open discussions, and create the space for new conversations about cultural and racial diversity.

- **Role model curiosity**

Questions borne of good intent, genuine curiosity, and humility are usually well-received. We call on leaders and allies to role model curiosity and a learning mindset by reflecting on their own assumptions and biases, educating themselves, listening, asking questions, and acknowledging significant days, celebrations, and events – in consultation with the workforce. We caution leaders not to place the cultural burden on culturally and racially diverse people.

## Case Study

### Leading a Conversation "You Can Ask That" Stockland



Aligned to Stockland's commitment to diversity and inclusion, Stockland has established employee advocacy groups across key focus areas including cultural diversity.

Stockland developed a reel of staff members from culturally and racially diverse backgrounds responding to nine questions relating to their racial, ethnic and/or ethno-religious backgrounds. This included questions relating to their heritage, strengths (as a result of their backgrounds), and stereotypes. The video was distributed via Stockland's online platform and was featured in a non-compulsory organisation-wide webinar.

Stockland advised that there was nothing more powerful than the experiences of staff and that this was a means of bringing these to life. The video was reported to have significant corporate reach and impact. Its broader use and incorporation is being considered, including as part of onboarding.

## Finding 2: Culturally and racially diverse women can bring unique and valuable expertise

In addition to drawing on the full talent pool, there is a strong argument in academic literature that organisations which have better representation of women – particularly culturally and racially diverse women – are better positioned to thrive in complex, globalised, environments.<sup>19</sup>

Increased representation has been found to support respectful and inclusive cultures where organisational change is driven by goal-setting, outcome tracking, and greater leadership accountability.<sup>20</sup>

The organisational benefits of such diversity and representation were identified in analysis undertaken by the Wall Street Journal which found that:

*"...S&P 500 companies which score best on a number of diversity metrics including board demographics, not only outperformed based on operating profit margin, but also produced better stock returns."<sup>21</sup>*

### Cultural diversity is a strength

Participants indicated that, over the course of their careers and in observing others in leadership roles, they considered cultural or racial background and/or gender could be viewed as a strength or advantage in certain circumstances.

*"My superpower is being other."<sup>22</sup>*

*"Flexing your style to suit the audience."<sup>23</sup>*

Several participants noted that they felt comfortable and confident being themselves and speaking openly about their diversity, cultural background, and its impact on their careers – particularly with their direct reports and more junior staff.

Participants also described circumstances where their cultural background could be a distinct advantage, particularly where:

- their cultural background and knowledge of the cultural context was aligned with international operations of the business, making them a preferred, qualified candidate for an overseas post;
- their cultural affinity with the company's workforce or client base (in Australia), made them a preferred, qualified candidate for leadership; or
- the company's owners or parent company were from the same cultural or racial background as the participant, making those Australia-based operations feel safer and more accepting.

These advantages are important qualifications for some positions, but opportunities for culturally and racially diverse women should not be limited to positions such as these.

## Culturally and racially diverse women are adept at creating diverse teams

Many participants said that once they had been appointed to leadership roles and had the position and power within an organisation to start building their own teams, cultural safety, inclusion, and diversity were a priority for them.<sup>24</sup>

A number of participants said that their personal experiences heightened their awareness of both barriers faced by culturally and racially diverse staff and the talent within these groups, in addition to emphasising gender equality. As a result, they were more deliberate in their focus on building culturally and racially diverse teams.

They hoped driving change in their own teams would encourage broader organisational change. Some participants noted that leaders and staff in other parts of their organisations were noticing and replicating their efforts.<sup>25</sup>

## Sponsorship over mentorship is needed to progress leadership

**Mentorship** is a relationship between two people where an individual with more experience and knowledge intentionally advises and guides another person with less experience, to support professional growth and development.

**Sponsorship** is the act of advocating and creating opportunities for people who may not otherwise have access to career advancement, such as through nominating them for promotions, making key introductions, and including them in leadership networks.

Mentoring is identified as important in both the literature,<sup>26</sup> and throughout the research consultation for this report.<sup>27</sup> It can overcome negative stereotyping and create an environment where cultural differences are respected and celebrated.<sup>28</sup>

However, studies<sup>29</sup> and interview participants<sup>30</sup> identify that sponsors or champions are much more effective than mentors.

“A sponsor is key; a mentor is secondary. If I didn't have those sponsors, I couldn't have made those contributions [as a leader and senior leader] and it'd be a loss to the business.”<sup>31</sup>

*"...the messaging is that having a mentor is what it takes; and that's dangerous – [young culturally and racially diverse women] think that if I don't have a mentor I can't do it."*<sup>32</sup>

Studies suggest that:

*"... high potential women are over-mentored and under-sponsored, relative to their male peers, and that they are not advancing or being promoted in their organi[s]ations the way men are ... sponsors serve as powerful gatekeepers to inner circles of the social, political, and corporate elite, which is particularly important in a society where Afro-Diasporic women face seemingly insurmountable barriers to senior leadership roles."*<sup>33</sup>

Most participants were enthusiastic mentors and sponsors, largely informally. These women saw this as an imperative and were keen to advocate for increasing cultural and racial diversity and happy to be the "poster girl" for cultural and racial diversity in their organisation or industry. Many said that they were overwhelmed by the positive feedback they received.

## Allyship is key

Most participants were conscious that carrying the 'cultural load' can sometimes be difficult and were grateful when White colleagues stepped into this space as allies.

Leaders can help staff build the courage and space to be effective allies as part of the workplace culture. Leaders can demonstrate their expectation that staff should support their colleagues and that it is safe for them to do so, including calling out racist and sexist behaviour. Allyship is:

*"...the idea of someone from an advantaged group supporting the professional and personal well-being of someone who is typically marginali[s]ed in society, such as women or people of colo[u]r."*<sup>34</sup>

And:

*"...leveraging one's position of power and privilege and courageously interrupting the status quo ..."*<sup>35</sup>

Leaders are key to the promotion and leadership advancement of culturally and racially diverse women.<sup>36</sup> This includes supporting and championing other efforts such as human resources policy reform.<sup>37</sup>

## What gets measured gets managed

Generally, cultural and racial diversity demographic data is collected through optional onboarding and survey questions for staff. Most participants said that the organisations they worked for did not collect comprehensive data on cultural and racial diversity. This could point to several hypotheses, including that staff do not feel diversity is a live issue and do not feel the need to report; or that do not feel safe highlighting their cultural and racial identity. Under these circumstances, mandating reporting could make people feel more unsafe given that it would become a normalised expectation.

In relation to cultural and racial diversity there is the added complexity of understanding what to benchmark against. Should organisations benchmark against the broader community, their customer base, or their local communities? There is currently a lack of clarity and consistency around what cultural and racial diversity is collected at the national level (see Breakout Box on page 24: What Government Can Do below for further discussion).

## Take Action:

To unlock the potential of culturally and racially diverse women in leadership, CEW calls on leaders and business to:

- **Gather data, set goals, measure progress, and hold leaders to account**

Adequate data and targets have driven improvement in the representation of women in corporate Australia.<sup>38</sup> Now is the time to build on that success, improve data gathering, and work towards setting organisational targets for cultural and racial diversity. Boards and executives should regularly track progress and communicate outcomes.

- **Actively invest in sponsorship**

Sponsorship was found to be highly effective in building the talent pipeline. Leaders should seek opportunities to sponsor culturally and racially diverse women, and lead executive teams to do the same.

- **Lead and develop allies**

Leaders can use their leadership shadow to set expectations and demonstrate how to be an ally for culturally and racially diverse women, while recognising and rewarding others who do the same.

## Case Study

### Workforce Data Collection Medibank

Some Australian organisations are already collecting and publicly disclosing the diversity of their workforce by ethnicity / cultural background.<sup>39</sup>

As reported in their Sustainability Report, Medibank used an engagement survey to capture the cultural background of their staff as part of their goal to ensure their workforce is representative of the changing cultural demographics of their customer base.<sup>40</sup> Medibank received a 76 per cent response rate, which provides a solid overview of the current workforce, with 32.1 per cent of respondents identifying as non-European or Australian.<sup>41</sup> While the data on ethnicity / cultural background did not provide a breakdown by sex, it is expected that this will be feasible given the other reported characteristics.



## Case Study

### Sponsorship “Elevate & Advocate” Sponsorship Program NSW Public Service Commission (PSC) and MindTribes



Given the reported limited access culturally and racially diverse women have to social capital and networks, it is critical that formal mechanisms and processes be established to address this barrier.

The NSW PSC, in partnership with MindTribes, launched a sponsorship program for culturally and linguistically diverse staff in May 2023 called “Elevate and Advocate.” Developed by experts in cultural equity and inclusion, the program will run for six months and aims to build lasting relationships between executive leaders and culturally and racially diverse employees for the purposes of supporting career mobility for culturally and racially diverse staff, as well as developing advocacy skills and inclusive leadership capability across Departments.<sup>42</sup>

The program makes a clear distinction between sponsorship and mentorship. Sponsorship is identified as being required to accelerate development and career opportunities as well as to facilitate mutual learning and create opportunities and spaces for executive staff to become advocates and allies.<sup>43</sup>

The program also includes measurement of outcomes and impact so that the career mobility of sponsees as a result of the sponsors direct actions can be tracked.

## Finding 3: International experience can deliver a powerful advantage to Australian workplaces

Many culturally and racially diverse women who participated in interviews for this report have worked overseas. They reported often feeling a lack of adequate recognition of this positive experience and in fact, perceived it as an additional barrier to their advancement.

Participants said they had noticed a marked lack of cultural diversity in leadership ranks of Australian organisations, compared to other English-speaking countries they had worked in.<sup>44</sup>

Several said it was a “shock” or “surprise” to them as they had expected leadership reflecting the diversity within the broader Australian population.<sup>45</sup>

*“I was actually really surprised coming back to Australia just how non-international it was. The interesting thing about working in London – it’s not just that there were different people in the workplace. It’s just that the mindset is very: we’re an international company; it’s an international workplace. It wasn’t like, we’re a British workplace with lots of visitors here. The thing with Australia is that it does just feel so Australian. I was at a dinner the other night – it was mainly CEOs and a few CFOs. ... We were looking around the room. I said ‘God, it’s so such an old, White room’. It’s just still so much like that – it does feel really different [compared to UK workplaces].”<sup>46</sup>*

Many participants felt that Australian organisations could be inward-looking, and prioritise domestic experience over international. They said when appointing leaders in Australian businesses, there was a lack of appreciation for international experience and a prioritisation of experience gained in ASX-listed organisations. This often led to the discounting or sidelining of people who had gained their professional experience outside of Australia.<sup>47</sup>

*"I didn't fully understand when I came to Australia how much the view was 'Australia for the Australians.'"*<sup>48</sup>

One leader noted that they had recently seen an increase in cultural diversity in their organisation (particularly in more junior level roles) as a by-product of the global war for talent. They felt that skills and labour shortages in the Australian market would increasingly force their organisation, and others in the sector, to find and recruit from new talent pools in different countries.<sup>49</sup>

## Multinational organisations are more diverse

Participants noted that multinational organisations, and particularly professional service firms, generally had more diverse workforces and more culturally and racially diverse leaders, than organisations that only operated in Australia. Some participants<sup>50</sup> felt that their career prospects would be better at a multinational organisation, with one participant<sup>51</sup> saying that this was a determinative factor in guiding her career path and choice of organisation.

Participants whose organisations relied heavily on the effective collaboration and movement of staff between operations based in different countries explained how this drove organisational conversations about cultural difference, cultural awareness, and "integration".<sup>52</sup>

### Take Action:

For Australian workplaces to take greater advantage of the international experience of some culturally and racially diverse women, CEW recommends leaders and corporations:

- **Break down the barriers and value international experience**

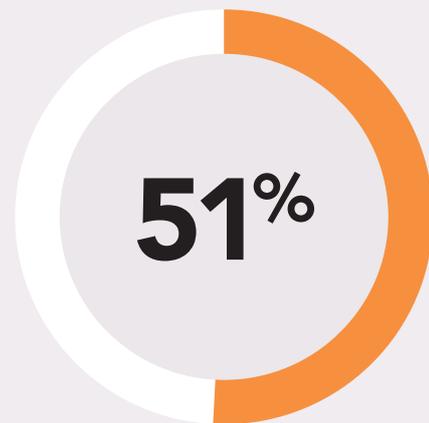
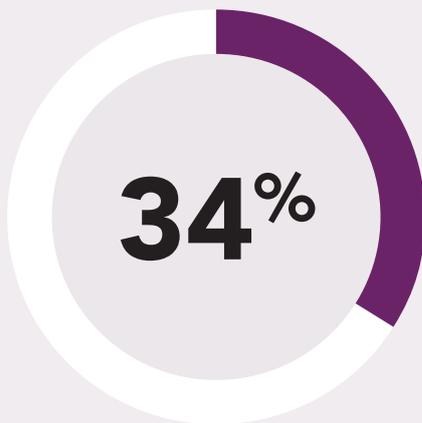
Relevant international experience is as valuable as domestic experience. Examine organisational policies and practices, particularly in relation to recruitment and progression processes, that consciously or unconsciously discount international experience. We call on leaders to visibly profile and endorse the value of cultural diversity and international experience.



## Finding 4: Racial discrimination is still pervasive and is a barrier to authenticity

The Australian Human Rights Commission found **34 per cent** of people from non-English speaking backgrounds "...reported experiencing racism based on complexion, ethnic origin, or religious belief within the last **12 months**."<sup>53</sup>

Catalyst's multi-national study (including Australia) found that, of the **2,734 women** from marginalised racial and ethnic groups surveyed, **51 per cent** had experienced racism in their current workplace.<sup>54</sup>



Culturally and racially diverse women have disclosed experiences of prejudice and bias in a number of studies, identifying this as a major barrier to career progression.<sup>55</sup> The experiences highlight the intersecting and compounding disadvantage and discrimination of sexism and racism,<sup>56</sup> and the cumulative impact of these identities.<sup>57</sup> This is often described as “double jeopardy”,<sup>58</sup> “inequality regimes”,<sup>59</sup> “concrete ceiling”,<sup>60</sup> and “double glass ceiling”.<sup>61</sup>

Participants referred to a spectrum of experiences from overt racism to micro-aggressions,<sup>62</sup> and workplace cultures that did not support open and transparent conversations about race.<sup>63</sup> A commonly reported experience of racism was in relation to their accent.<sup>64</sup>

*“People tend to not listen to you [when you have an accent] and my staff are experiencing this on a constant basis.”<sup>65</sup>*

Participants shared that the barrier of accent was often couched in feedback on communication style and abilities,<sup>66</sup> with one participant disclosing that they took steps to address this barrier.

*“I did take accent modification classes.”<sup>67</sup>*

Culturally and racially diverse participants who reported having an “Australian” accent reported that this had enabled easier career progression,<sup>68</sup> with one identifying themselves as a “safe bet” because they were born in Australia and had an Australian accent.<sup>69</sup> Another participant stated:

**“I think that if I looked exactly the same and if I sounded different [with a foreign accent] I personally think that my opportunities will have been different.”<sup>70</sup>**

Conversely, other participants stated:

*“[t]o be successful you need to learn to work with all sorts of people and learn to coexist with people who don’t understand or may undermine your cultural heritage.”<sup>71</sup>*

It is important to note that these experiences are not typical for all who fall into the classification of culturally and racially diverse. For instance, Northern European accents were reported by participants to not attract the same criticism or barriers, instead being identified as “exotic” and conferring benefits.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to accent, several participants felt that their names acted as a barrier.<sup>73</sup> One participant stated that “...people struggle to spell or pronounce my name,” disclosing that she has never had success applying for roles using her given name, so has anglicised her name.<sup>74</sup>

One participant noted that she often felt overlooked in meetings because, as her name was perceived by colleagues as difficult to pronounce, they would avoid using her name, and so did not engage with her at all in meetings.<sup>75</sup>

Studies suggest that racism experienced day-to-day by culturally and racially diverse women creates a lack of safety, and are clear internal barriers to their career advancement.<sup>76</sup>

## Personal experiences of diversity vary widely

However, true to the diversity within the culturally and racially diverse women participating in this report, not all participants reported experiencing racism or discrimination in their leadership journeys.

Indeed, two of the 27 culturally and racially diverse women leaders interviewed for this report said they *did not* feel different in their leadership roles or organisations because of their cultural heritage.<sup>77</sup> One said that she had deliberately avoided placing herself in a box and had focused on work output and achievements, and this had helped her access leadership opportunities without a need to focus on her cultural identity (or other identity characteristics). The other noted that while she did not feel different due to her cultural background, she had felt at a disadvantage in her workplace because of her gender.

Two participants (one man and one woman) said that they felt some culturally and racially diverse individuals in corporate organisations “got in their own way” and that they held beliefs and mindsets that were self-limiting, and that they self-selected out of leadership opportunities. This, they suggested, created unnecessary obstacles in their careers and, at times, barriers to their own progression to leadership, where none in fact existed.<sup>78</sup>

Two participants (one man and one woman) felt that it was also necessary for culturally and racially diverse staff to seek to better “assimilate” in Australian

workplaces and “let go” of limiting perceptions of cultural bias.<sup>79</sup>

While not the majority experience of those interviewed for this report, these differing accounts reflect the diversity of lived experience and highlight the importance of a nuanced conversation about cultural and racial diversity to promote inclusivity.

## Western and masculine models of leadership limit culturally and racially diverse women

A small number of participants considered that leaders and Board members of Australian organisations have a narrow and limiting view of what a good corporate leader or director looks like: namely a White, male executive, with professional experience in ASX-listed companies.<sup>80</sup>

Research suggest that idealised and dominant leadership qualities and traits informed by masculine and “western” models of leadership, such as extroversion, self-promotion, and direct communication, are a significant barrier to leadership for culturally and racially diverse women.<sup>81</sup> A number of culturally and racially diverse participants identified these traits as a consistent barrier in their leadership journey.<sup>82</sup> As one participant observed:

*“The higher you go [up the leadership ladder] the more you turn white.”<sup>83</sup>*

This is in part due to stereotypes about culturally and racially diverse women’s leadership styles,<sup>84</sup> and, for some culturally and racially diverse women, due to these qualities being seen as counter to their cultural values of respect and deference.<sup>85</sup> As one participant stated:

*“I do not like to interrupt, so I wait for my time to speak, so sometimes you wait forever.”<sup>86</sup>*

This can mean women, and particularly culturally and racially diverse women, are overlooked and perceived as unqualified,<sup>87</sup> or lacking leadership potential.<sup>88</sup>

In response, culturally and racially diverse women have reported deliberately conforming to stereotypes of successful leadership.<sup>89</sup> This includes the adoption of bi-culturalism. This is the ability to negotiate between their identities and interact and connect within and

outside of their own community for the purposes of establishing relationships and networks.<sup>90</sup> Trying to appear and behave like White men and women has been reported to be explicitly expected of culturally and racially diverse women,<sup>91</sup> with research identifying negative repercussions for choosing not to “code-switch.”<sup>92</sup> For example, participants in this research noted:

*“I know I have the ability to switch, so I can choose that.”<sup>93</sup>*

*“While it [the workplace] was diverse, we all still needed to assimilate.”<sup>94</sup>*

A majority of participants noted that in their workplaces in corporate Australia their cultural diversity had made them feel uncomfortable, “different” or like an “outsider”,<sup>95</sup> that they felt a strong sense of “otherness”,<sup>96</sup> and that they felt they were “always the odd one out in the room, all the time”.<sup>97</sup> These participants said they felt compelled to “minimise” their difference,<sup>98</sup> or that they “stick out like a sore thumb.”<sup>99</sup>

Some participants said that they had felt this sense of otherness and difference from the time they entered the workplace and continued to feel it to this day, even as they occupied senior leadership positions within leading Australian companies.

*“The sense of otherness is there ALL the time – everyday. I sometimes feel it very acutely. And I don’t think that shifts with time or experience.... The sense of otherness is always there.”<sup>100</sup>*

*“So much pressure to blend in. You already look different; you don’t want to be seen as different due to the things you do.”<sup>101</sup>*

Many participants spoke of the difficulty they experienced in being “culturally authentic” in their work environments and of the need to “adapt”, “flex”, “compromise”, “minimise difference”, or “conform” to better “fit in” and progress or succeed in Australian corporate workplaces.<sup>102</sup>

One participant said they found it difficult to be “culturally authentic” in the corporate environment.<sup>103</sup>

Some spoke about feeling – or in some cases, being explicitly told by others in the workplace – that it was in their professional interests to conform as best they could (in a visible sense) to the dominant culture, and

not let their cultural diversity stand out. This included through their appearance (clothing or hairstyle), the way they spoke (accent, language, volume or how expressive they were), or their mannerisms (body language, hand gestures).<sup>104</sup>

While many participants said they had not deliberately sought to “hide” or deny their cultural background at work, they reflected that they had chosen not to highlight it out of a desire to avoid standing out or being viewed as different.<sup>105</sup> Others said that they felt it may be perceived as irrelevant or unnecessary to discuss their cultural background, or cultural diversity more generally, in a work context, and did not feel welcome to talk about it in the workplace or with their senior leadership teams. Ensuring workplaces are culturally safe – that is free of discrimination and genuinely inclusive – is critical to retaining diverse talent and reaping the benefits of diversity.

## Authenticity is easier with seniority

Most participants reflected that their seniority gave them more comfort and confidence in being their authentic self at work, and sharing their cultural heritage.<sup>106</sup>

Many said the positional power of senior leadership gave them the confidence to drive conversations and action around cultural diversity.

*“Fortunately, I’m at leadership level where I’m like: here I am! But it’s taken me probably until the role before this one where I could – I still remember almost feeling like I could just exhale and let my shoulders down and I was just like... I’m going to be me. But it took a lot. I had to be quite senior before I felt that way. And even to this day, there’s still stuff I need to be a little mindful of, depending on my audience.”<sup>107</sup>*

## Culturally and racially diverse women need access to employment networks

The importance of access to employment networks has been consistently identified in the literature as key to career progression and access to leadership and executive opportunities for culturally and racially diverse women.<sup>108</sup> Despite this, research has found

that culturally and racially diverse women have limited access to these networks.<sup>109</sup> This was raised by interviewees for this report.<sup>110</sup>

*“The networks and opportunities they [White colleagues] get are different. I feel I have to work harder to know people and get to know people.”<sup>111</sup>*

Participants pointed to a number of reasons for this including socio-economic status and the school-based networks and relationships that accompany higher socio-economic status;<sup>112</sup> as well as organisational expectations and culture, including formal and social events.<sup>113</sup> The latter reflects findings in broader research: western models and organisational expectations have been found to conflict with the intersecting identities of culturally and racially diverse women,<sup>114</sup> with expectations that they socialise in ways that may be counter to their cultural and religious beliefs.<sup>115</sup>

This barrier is particularly problematic given that, according to research, women with low relationship capital within their organisation are more likely to resign.<sup>116</sup>

## You still can’t be what you can’t see

The notion that “you can’t be what you can’t see” resonated with many interview participants.<sup>117</sup> The impact of this was profound for many participants, with the lack of visibility limiting role modelling and the opportunity to break down barriers to leadership.<sup>118</sup>

Many participants reflected on the fact that they had not had any culturally and racially diverse women leaders as role models or mentors earlier in their careers. They felt having culturally and racially diverse women leaders to look to would have had a positive impact on their careers. The presence or absence of visible culturally and racially diverse women leaders influenced participants’ decisions about joining organisations or seeking leadership positions.<sup>119</sup>

*“You can look at her [a culturally and racially diverse woman in a leadership position], you can say, one day you can definitely be successful.”<sup>120</sup>*

*“Having more diversity will attract more diversity. There is something in numbers.”<sup>121</sup>*

## Take Action:

To create more culturally safe workplaces that will enable culturally and racially diverse women to be their authentic selves, CEW recommends that leaders:

- **Engage in self-reflection**

Leaders cast a long shadow on workplace cultures, and often it is difficult for leaders to receive genuine feedback on their impact. We call on leaders to engage in deliberate self-reflection about cultural assumptions and biases, acknowledge any mistakes, and commit to self-improvement.

- **Build a culturally safe workplace**

Assess the organisation's culture of safety in discussing gender and race, and take action in response.

- **Embed inclusive practices**

Reorganise social and networking events to ensure inclusion. Create opportunities for cultural exchanges and celebrations of religious and significant cultural days.



## What government can do

This report has focussed on findings and recommendations in relation to corporate Australia. Governments also have a role to play in advancing more culturally diverse women into leadership.

### Model culturally safe, diverse, and inclusive culture

As role models and Australia's largest employers, it is important that all levels of Australian governments provide leadership within their own workplaces. It is encouraging that the federal Government has embarked on a cultural and racial diversity strategy as a matter of priority.

In 2022, Australia formed the most gender equal government in Australian history. The 2023 OECD rankings saw Australia moving up an exceptional 17 places in the gender equality rankings, due to increased political participation and economic empowerment. This progress is largely due to succession planning, targets, and supporting women into leadership.

However, the federal Government, as an employer, has more work to do in collecting and reporting on cultural and racial diversity, and on intersectional data.

*"While the Australian Public Service Commission collects [data on cultural diversity](#) through the APS employment database, the information is incomplete because it is provided voluntarily and because, apart from gender, the only relevant metrics are an employee's first language spoken and country of birth."<sup>122</sup>*

### Strengthen data reporting and defining terms

The Australian Human Rights Commission found that:

*...comprehensive national data on the prevalence, nature, and impacts of racial inequities is not available; longitudinal data is extremely limited. Where datasets do exist, they cannot readily be shared or compared.<sup>123</sup>*

Country of birth and language spoken at home have historically been the main diversity indicators used by Australian government agencies. But experts say this does not adequately capture the diversity of the community — not least because many Australians from

diverse backgrounds are born in Australia and speak English.<sup>124</sup>

CEW commends the federal Government for commencing work to address improved data collection on race, culture, and ethnicity.<sup>125</sup> The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Andrew Giles, committed the Government to "...introducing whole of government standards for measuring Australia's diversity to improve policy design, resource allocation and surface planning."<sup>126</sup>

Equally important is taking an intersectional approach. Gender and cultural and racial diversity are largely measured and researched independently.<sup>127</sup>

Focusing on one category inevitably obscures and oversimplifies other interconnected realities and experiences, including those related to race and gender, reinforcing the need for more intersectional analyses.<sup>128</sup>

The Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) collects world-leading data on gender. CEW, along with others, has strongly advocated for WGEA to collect other demographic data to present a more intersectional picture of gender equality in Australian workplaces. A recent review of the Act has recommended this be implemented and WGEA is currently investigating an approach to collecting, analysing and reporting on disaggregated gender metrics.<sup>129</sup>

### Encourage workplaces to work towards setting targets for intersectional diversity

Government encouragement for business to set targets for intersectional diversity can have a powerful effect. Experience with women's participation on corporate Boards shows that government encouragement, even without specific regulation, can drive change, particularly if government makes it clear that failure to see progress may result in regulation being considered.

- In the UK, the 2016 Parker Review recommended each FTSE 100 Board to have at least one director from an ethnic minority background by 2021.
- A review in 2022 found that twice as many companies had minority ethnic directors.<sup>130</sup>

# Conclusion

There is no shortage of talented, meritorious, and capable women from culturally and racially diverse backgrounds in Australia ready to excel in executive leadership roles.

To harness their potential, benefiting businesses and the wider community, CEW calls on leaders and corporations to:

- **Lead a conversation about cultural and racial diversity**
- **Role model curiosity and engage in self-reflection**
- **Gather data, set goals, measure progress, and hold leaders to account**
- **Actively invest in sponsorship**
- **Build culturally safe workplaces and break down systemic barriers**

We invite business leaders to join us on this journey, and look forward to a world with diverse women leaders at every decision-making table.



# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Methodology

The research was undertaken between January 2023 and June 2023.

Intersection engaged with 33 people for this project, and conducted a total of **27** semi-structured interviews. This included **21** interviews with culturally and racially diverse women leaders, **three** interviews with culturally and racially diverse male leaders and **three** interviews with managers of culturally and racially diverse women. The interviewee sample offered diversity in both experience and sector representation, including finance, technology, law, government, health, real estate, retail, media, mining, and sport. Intersection also conducted **one** focus group with a total of **six** culturally and racially diverse women leaders. The participants were recruited by Chief Executive Women primarily through their membership and Connect Community. Participants self-identified as culturally and racially diverse during recruitment. Intersection did not seek to verify nor confirm the racial, ethnic, and/or ethno-religious background of participants, following this self-identification.

The interviews and focus groups primarily focused on experiences of leadership in Australia; the barriers that prevented or continue to prevent culturally and racially diverse women's access to leadership and executive positions; and the factors that enable intersectional leadership. Quota sampling ensured that while small, a variety of perspectives on organisational culture and strategies and recommendations for best practice were identified.

In addition to these qualitative methods, a desktop review of publicly available data and a literature review were undertaken to better understand both the current levels of representation in leadership and the experiences of culturally and racially diverse women in these positions. The inclusion and exclusion criteria and search strategy used for the literature review is provided at **Appendix 2**. Approximately 60 items of empirical and grey literature, the latter including government publications and agency reports, were reviewed as part of the literature review.

### Limitations of this report

The quota sampling used in this research was deemed appropriate given the purpose of this research was to draw qualitative insights to complement broader research undertaken by Chief Executive Women. However, it is acknowledged that this form of non-probability sampling and the size of the sample prevents claims of the findings being representative. In relation to the desktop review and literature review, it is acknowledged that the inconsistency in terminology used within the international and domestic bodies of literature (see below) may prevent a true comparison of findings, particularly given this was not monitored and recorded throughout the research process. Additionally, such disparity may have also reduced the number of relevant materials sourced, despite broad search terms being used (see Appendix 2).<sup>131</sup>

## Appendix 2: Literature review overview

A literature review was carried out to better understand the experiences of culturally and racially diverse women in leadership roles, the barriers to leadership and executive opportunities for this cohort, and the enablers and supports required to improve role access and professional development.

### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria:

<b>Language:</b>	Documents in English
<b>Date:</b>	Studies or papers published from 2003 to 2023.
<b>Types of studies:</b>	Empirical research, workplace studies or reviews, policy and practice guidelines, theoretical papers, demographic data, directives and memos, organisational resources, and program overviews.
<b>Context:</b>	Studies, papers, and resources regarding culturally and racially diverse women in or aspiring to leadership positions and the barriers to and enablers for these opportunities.

Exclusion criteria:

- Studies and papers without a focus on culturally and racially diverse women.
- Studies and papers without a focus on leadership or executive roles.

### Search strategy

To source relevant material, an aggregated search approach was undertaken to search for empirical literature, rather than individual databases, given the predicted limited results. A range of key words, with alternate spelling and combinations were used to ensure the search captured both Australian and international literature.

The key words used included:

“diverse women and leadership”, “CALD women and leadership” “women of colo[u]r and leadership”, “minority women and leadership”, “diverse women and executive”, “CALD women and executive”, “women of colo[u]r and executive”, “minority women and executive”, “diverse women and management”, “CALD women and management”, and “women of colo[u]r and management”, and “minority women and management”.

To source grey literature and information on relevant programs and policies, the same key words and combinations were used through Google Search. Only publicly available grey literature was used, with reports requiring subscriptions not included.

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This report has been co-authored by Intersection Pty Ltd and Chief Executive Women, with generous sponsorship from Macquarie Group Limited.

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CEW's shared mission is "women leaders enabling *all* women." CEW's over 1,250 members represent Australia's most senior and distinguished women leaders across business, academia, government, the arts, and not-for profit sectors. CEW's members have leading roles within Australia's largest public and private organisations. They oversee more than 1.3 million employees and \$749 billion in revenue. Members' organisations have a combined market capitalisation greater than \$1.144 trillion and contribute in excess of \$249 billion to Australia's GDP.

Since 1985, CEW has influenced and engaged all levels of Australian business and government to achieve gender balance. Through advocacy, research, targeted programs, and scholarships, CEW helps remove the barriers to women's progression and ensure equal opportunity for prosperity. CEW's members work actively to realise our vision of a community where women and men have equal economic and social choices and responsibilities.

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## Intersection Pty Ltd

Intersection is a unique consulting team of professionals with deep expertise in gender equality and cultural change working with organisations and leaders to achieve best practice in diversity, equality and inclusion, and respect at work.

Our experience spans government, not-for-profit and the private sectors including the military, sport, resources, arts, media and entertainment, and transport.

The Intersection team includes highly qualified social researchers, lawyers, policy-makers and academics who have led major national reforms including the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Respect@ Work National Inquiry* published in 2020. We utilise policy, legal, human rights, and work, health and safety frameworks to assist organisations drive workplace excellence.

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