

The gendered leadership gap and the humanitarian sector

By Ayla Black
28 March 2017

Globally, women [remain underrepresented](#) in leadership positions across sectors. Despite there being some progress, it will take another [118 years](#) to close the gender gap at current rates of progress. For those women who do manage to break through the barriers, their remuneration will be significantly less than that of their male counterparts.

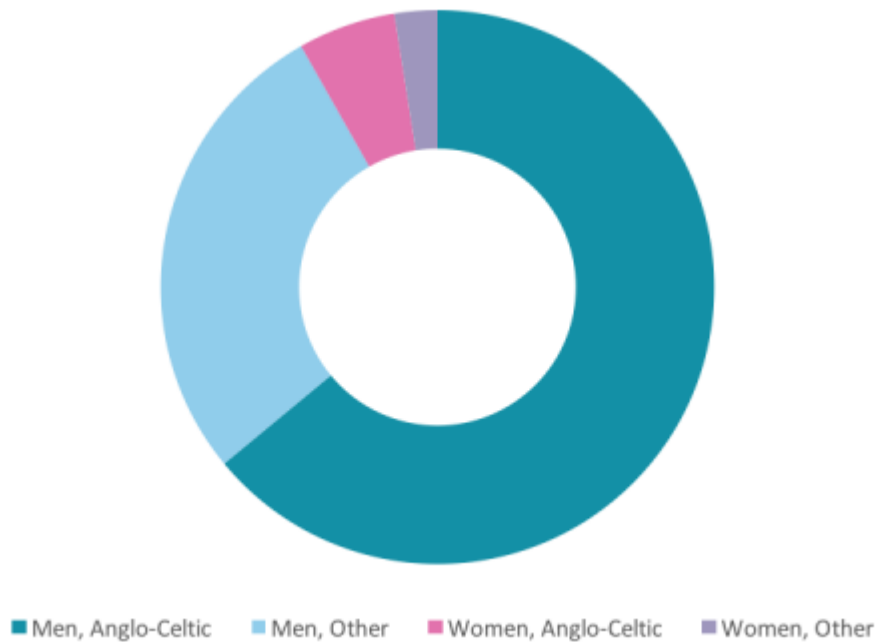
Globally, women are **118 years away** from closing the gender gap



The [2016 Gender Equality Scorecard](#) found that full-time female employees in Australia take home just 77 per cent of men's average full-time income – a staggering \$27,000 less. Not only do women take home less than men on average, the [pay gap is even larger](#) in organisations where leadership is female-dominated. Despite making up half of the nation's workforce, women hold just 16.3 per cent of CEO positions and 37.4 per cent of all manager roles. Only one out of every six CEOs in Australia is a woman. Women not only remain underrepresented in leadership roles, but they're disadvantaged in the path to attaining them; as women's careers progress, their representation declines, along with their opportunities.

For women of diverse cultural backgrounds, the disadvantage is even more acute. New [research from the Diversity Council of Australia](#) revealed that in 2015 the top tiers of ASX companies were lacking in gender and cultural diversity. Sixty-four per cent of ASX company directors were Anglo-Celtic men while 27.8 per cent were men from other backgrounds; Anglo-Celtic women made up 5.7 per cent of company directors compared to just 2.5 per cent women from other backgrounds. If you're a woman *or* from a diverse cultural background, the odds aren't in your favour. Those odds are at their worst if you're a woman from a diverse cultural background.

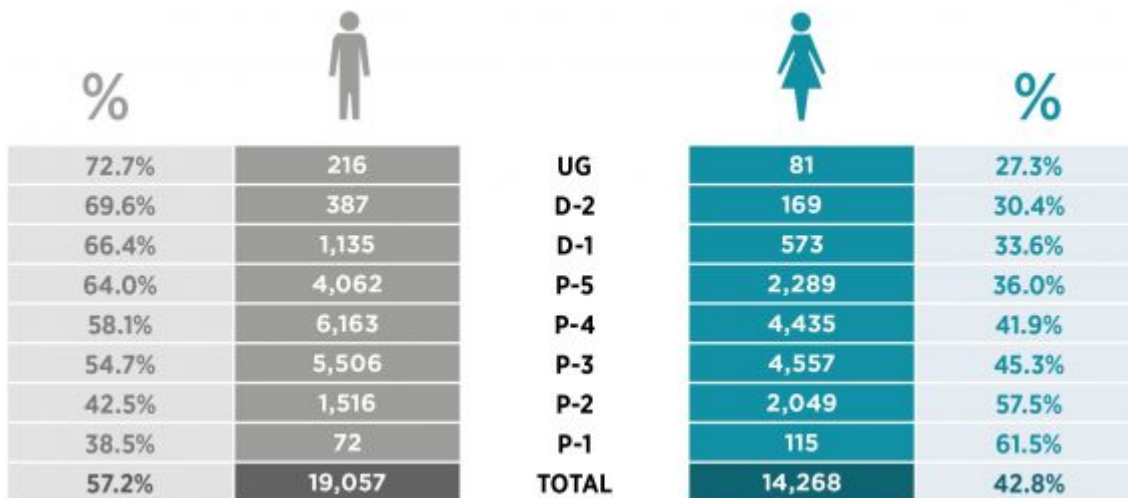
Figure 1: Gender and ethnicity of ASX Company Directors in 2015, by percentage



Women in the humanitarian sector fare similarly poorly. [Research](#) recently released by [Centre for Humanitarian Leadership](#) and [Humanitarian Advisory Group](#) suggests that the challenges facing women aspiring to leadership in the humanitarian sector are as pervasive as in other sectors. In the humanitarian sector women still have [limited access to positions of leadership](#). The humanitarian workforce worldwide consists largely of women, up to 75 per cent in fact, but as of February 2017, only [8 of the 30 UN Humanitarian Coordinators](#) worldwide are women (just 26.5 per cent).

A report recently released by UN Women on the [Status of Women in the United Nations System](#) showed that in 2016 only the lowest two levels of professional employment had achieved gender parity with the representation of women employees at over 50 per cent. The data reveals that as the level of employment increases, the percentage of women employees continually decreases, with women comprising only 27.3 per cent of employees at the highest professional level. Despite women being far greater in numbers at entry level, as one climbs the leadership ranks women are increasingly underrepresented.

Figure 2: Representation of women in the UN, by level



The persistence of the leadership gender gap can be attributed to a number of factors revealed in the course of research. Among these are attitudinal and cultural barriers, lack of pipeline (i.e., a clear pathway for career progression), self-confidence gap, a lack of effective networks and mentors, and unconscious bias. The unique demands of a humanitarian career, such as the need to rapidly deploy, non-family postings and long work hours, disadvantage those with caring responsibilities, which women still disproportionately shoulder.

Why do we need more women in leadership positions?

The few examples of female role models at senior levels exacerbates the perception amongst women that advancement opportunities are limited, potentially resulting in reduced female aspirations for leadership. This cycle needs to be broken. The lack of women in leadership has impacts across sectors and countries. It inhibits productivity and performance of work places and has individual and national health, education, political and socio-economic impacts. Strong female leadership has been linked with disrupting the dynamics that prevent women and girls from aspiring to leadership positions.

There is some progress. In Australia, across sectors, the [pipeline of women into manager roles](#) is strengthening. [Innovative measures](#) are being trialled to counter unconscious bias. Similarly, in the humanitarian sector [efforts are being made](#) to see women's leadership opportunities strengthened and a pipeline developed. Though there is some progress, there isn't enough. Especially given that this rate of progress will result in closure of the gendered leadership gap in 118 years.

Leadership equality isn't about simply having the same number of women and men in

positions at the top or in the organisational structure, it is about ensuring that there is equal opportunity for both women and men to get there – and that when they do, they are equally supported, valued and remunerated.

The full research report released by [Humanitarian Advisory Group](#) and [Centre for Humanitarian Leadership](#) can be found [here](#). The findings and implications identified in this research were presented at the [2017 Australasian Aid Conference](#), and will be further explored at the upcoming [Asia Pacific Humanitarian Leadership Conference](#).

Ayla Black is a Policy and Program Officer with the Humanitarian Advisory Group.

A recording of the 2017 Australasian Aid Conference session where this research was presented can be accessed [here](#).

About the author/s

Ayla Black

Ayla Black is a Policy and Program Officer with the Humanitarian Advisory Group.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/gendered-leadership-gap-humanitarian-sector-20160328/>

Date downloaded: 27 April 2024



Australian
National
University

The Devpolicy Blog is based at the Development Policy Centre, Crawford School of Public Policy, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University.