

THE VIEW FROM THE BOARDROOM



How Senior Women Executives Are Reimagining Leadership in 2026

A report by the Boardroom,
based on our member survey

Voices from the Boardroom

Selected anonymous reflections from survey participants

“

Boards say they want diversity, but they don't want discomfort.

“

It's not a pipeline issue. I've been ready. I've just never been invited.

“

We know how to lead. What we need is someone to open the door.

“

When I finally made it onto a board, it felt like I'd walked into a private club.

“

When one woman walks into the boardroom, she changes the conversation. But when many walk in together, we change the system.

These voices cut through policy and optics. They reflect the quiet, often invisible toll of exclusion—and the power of being heard.

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Introduction



1. Foreword

By Diana Markaki-Bartholdi, Founder & CEO, the Boardroom

I founded the Boardroom to fight onli-ness—the quiet but isolating experience of being the only woman in the room where decisions are made. But today, our members are not alone. They are shaping boardrooms, redefining leadership, and reimagining what power can look like when it is shared.

In a world of uncertainty, our members do not sit back. They sit up straighter. They ask tougher questions. They move companies forward. This report reflects their voices—bold, insightful, unfiltered.

Let this be a mirror and a call to action: not just to listen to these women—but to act on what they are telling us.

“

The problem isn't the pipeline. It's the gatekeeping.



2. Executive Summary

This report presents the collective insight of nearly 100 senior women executives—members of the Boardroom—who are navigating leadership at the highest levels across industries and geographies. Their experiences illuminate not just the obstacles that persist, but also the overlooked opportunities for boards and companies to evolve.

The findings point to a fundamental disconnect: while women are ready for board roles, the systems responsible for selecting them remain opaque, informal, and resistant to change. It's not competence that's lacking—it's access.

Yet these women remain forward-looking. They are not asking for validation; they are calling for a modernisation of leadership pipelines, boardroom culture, and corporate governance. Their answers reflect both a deep awareness of risk and a fierce optimism about what leadership could become—if companies are willing to listen.

Key Insights

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1. Key Insights

1. External pressure is high—and rising

Senior women executives are navigating a world defined by disruption: economic uncertainty, geopolitical shifts, and rapid technological change. Yet boards are often unprepared to address these forces with the urgency or imagination required.

2. Soft power is still undervalued

While technical expertise dominates board agendas, members consistently flagged blind spots in areas like stakeholder trust, talent risk, and culture. These “softer” dimensions of leadership are too often sidelined—despite being central to long-term value creation.

3. Boards are struggling to reinvent themselves

Respondents described a lack of succession planning, weak innovation oversight, and outdated board composition. Many boards still select directors based on outdated definitions of credibility, often favoring traditional CEO profiles over those with relevant, contemporary expertise.

4. Access—not readiness—is the real barrier

Most members feel they are board-ready, yet remain excluded from decision-making circles. The selection process remains heavily relationship-based, often excluding highly qualified candidates who lack the “right” sponsor or network.

5. Leadership success still comes at a cost

Even at the highest levels, women report needing to outperform male peers to be considered equal. Many navigate silent exclusion, performative allyship, and conflicting expectations—all while managing complex business environments.

6. Women know what works—and what they need

Members were clear: they don’t need more workshops or token invitations. They want formal sponsorship, strategic visibility, and access to real decision-makers. What moves the needle is not encouragement—but elevation.





2. Findings at a Glance

84% identified technological disruption as the most urgent external threat.

62% said their biggest barrier was lack of access to informal networks or sponsors.

Over half reported needing to work harder than male peers to receive equal recognition.

The most overlooked boardroom opportunity:
women's leadership.

The most urgent board blind spot:
diversity of thought.

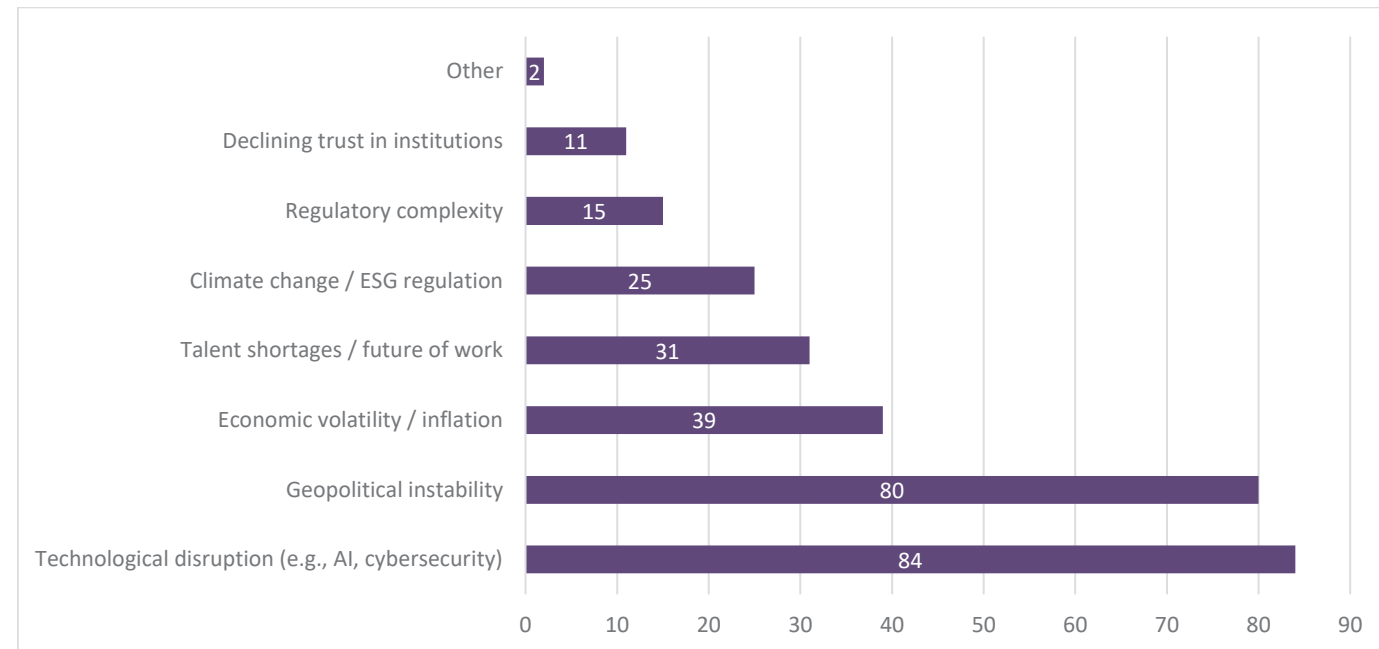
The most desired support:
formal sponsorship programs.

Data Highlights

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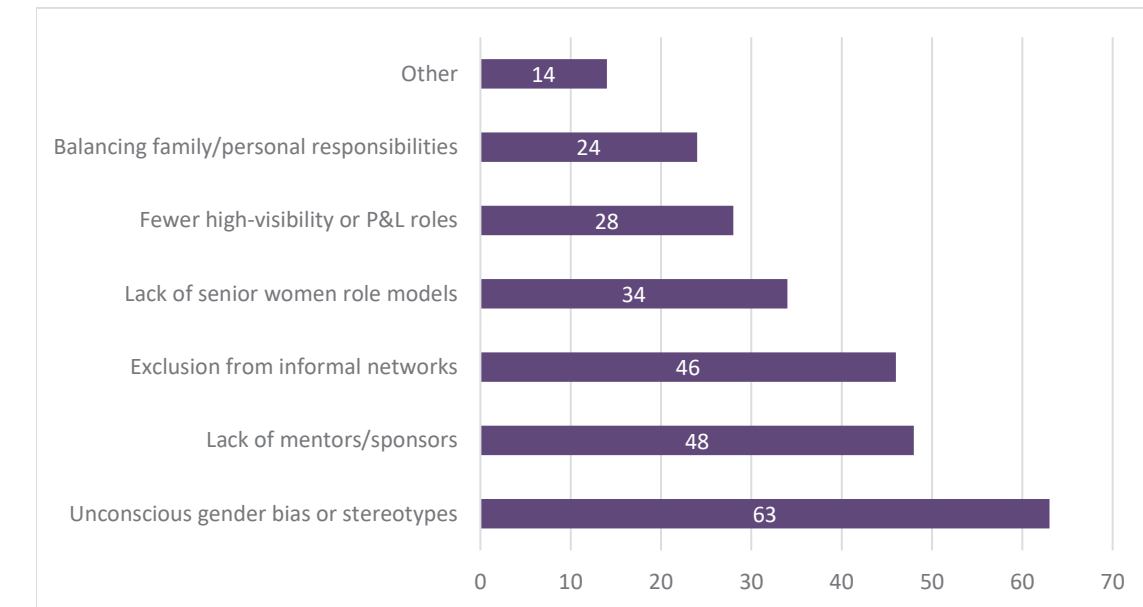
Top External Challenges

- Technological disruption
- Geopolitical instability
- ESG and regulatory shifts



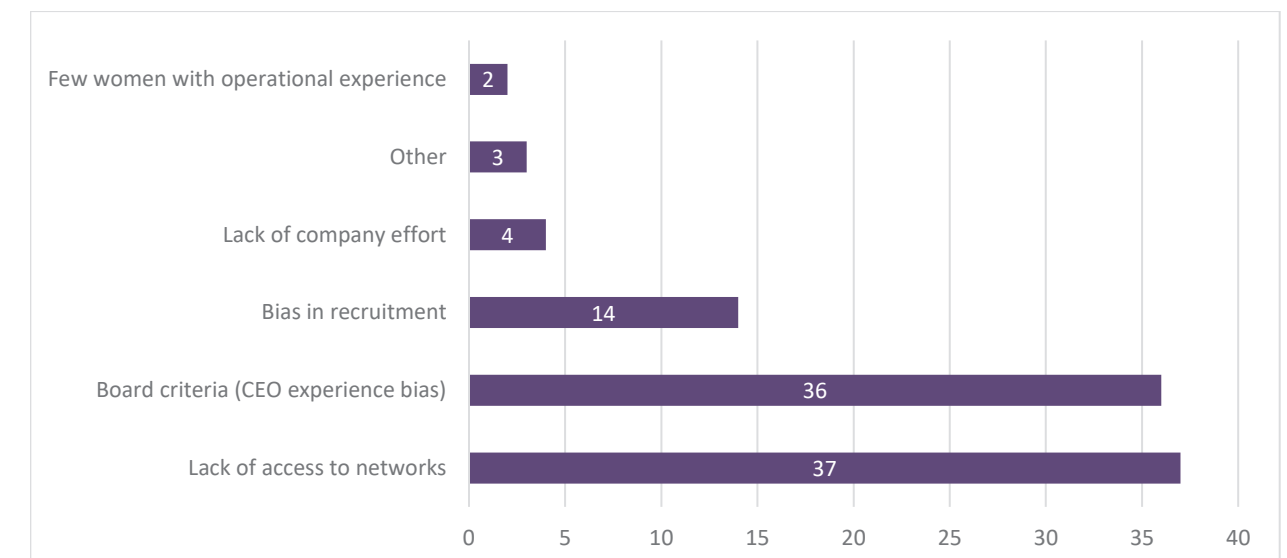
Top Career Barriers

- Lack of access to sponsors or informal networks
- Bias in leadership evaluation
- Limited visibility to decision-makers



Top Obstacles to Board Entry

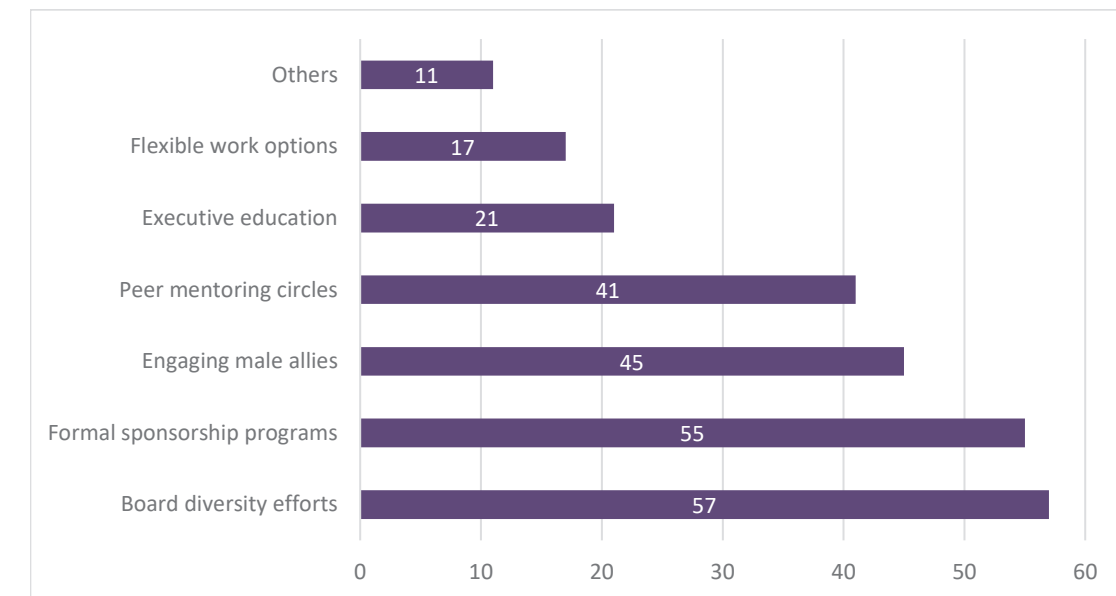
- Informal recruitment practices
- Narrow selection criteria
- CEO-only bias in candidate profiles





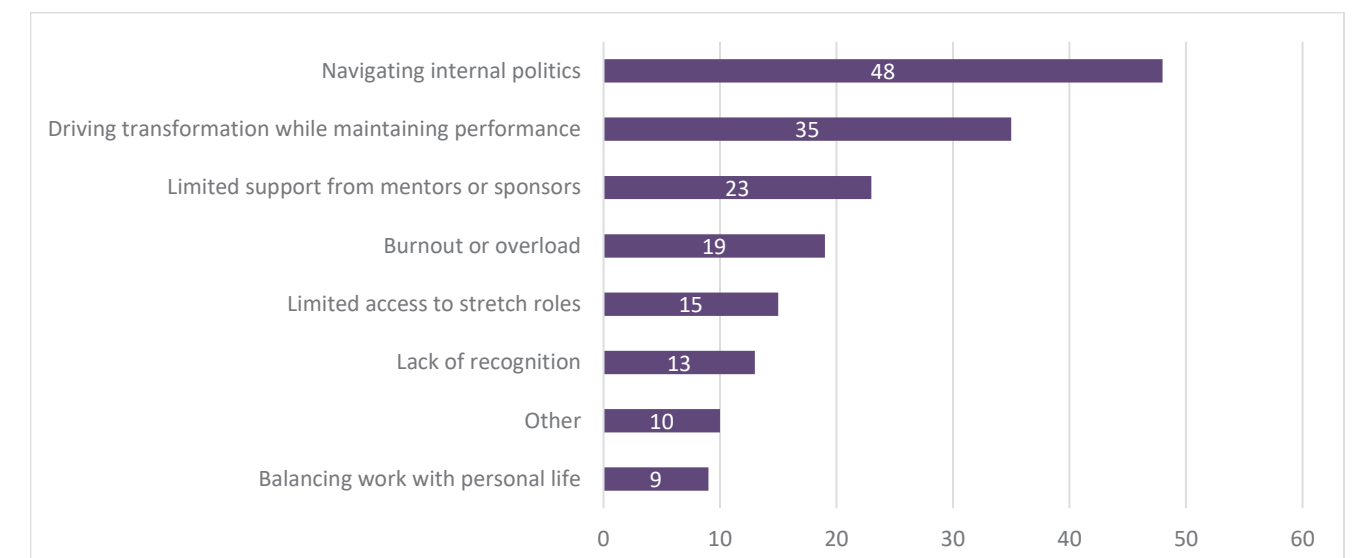
Most Desired Support

- Strategic sponsorship and mentorship
- Access to boardroom simulations and referrals
- Male allyship and active advocacy from existing board members



Biggest Executive Challenges Today

- Navigating complexity under pressure
- Building resilient teams amidst change
- Managing upward in volatile environments



Methodology

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Survey period: June–August 2025

Total respondents: **96**

Respondents:

Senior women executives, all members of the Boardroom

Roles included:

Roles included: CEOs, CFOs, COOs, General Counsel, Non-Executive Directors, and senior C-suite leaders

Survey included both quantitative and open-text qualitative questions



Final Reflections

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Final Reflections

These findings are not surprising. But they are urgent.

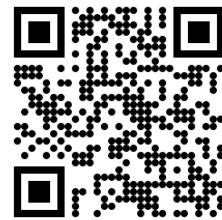
The barriers facing women executives are not new, but they are evolving. The more boards talk about inclusion without adjusting their practices, the wider the gap grows between intention and impact.

The findings of this report are clear: the problem is not in the talent pool, it's in the systems we maintain.

To those in positions of power: ask yourself, who isn't in the room, and why? And to the women still knocking at the door: your voice is powerful, your presence matters, and the boardroom is not complete without you.

Let's not wait
for systems
to evolve.
Let's build
new ones.





Scan for more information

