Women in supply chain leadership: Bridging the representation gap

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Abstract

Women represent a significant proportion of the global supply chain workforce, yet their presence declines sharply at senior leadership levels, highlighting a persistent and widening representation gap. This paper examines the structural, cultural, and organisational factors that sustain this imbalance, drawing on industry data, practitioner insight, and research to map the disparity across career stages. It identifies critical barriers including mid-career attrition linked to the 'motherhood penalty' and burnout, the lack of sponsorship and access to influential networks, unconscious bias in hiring and promotion, and structural constraints such as inflexible operating models and narrow role definitions. The paper also explores how entrenched workplace cultures and the separation of operational and functional career paths limit progression opportunities for women. Alongside these systemic factors, it considers the role of individual agency and leadership visibility in shaping career outcomes. The analysis highlights that early pipeline representation does not translate into executive diversity without sustained intervention. A practical framework is presented, outlining targeted strategies for organisations to improve representation, including embedding accountability at leadership level, redesigning roles for flexibility, strengthening sponsorship programmes, and removing bias from talent processes. The paper concludes that closing the gender gap is both a strategic and operational imperative for supply chain organisations seeking to strengthen leadership capability. This article is also included in ***The Business & Management Collection*** *which can be accessed at https://hstalks.com/business/.*

Keywords

gender diversity, supply chain leadership, women in management, talent pipeline, organisational inclusion, career progression

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INTRODUCTION

At the 2025 Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals (CSCMP) conference in Verona, a panel discussion posed a deceptively simple question: 'Women and SCM: Is there a supply/demand balance?'

The question is not a novel one; versions of it have been asked for years. Yet the answer remains uncomfortably clear: representation at the workforce level does not translate to representation at the leadership level.

Many senior leaders look around their organisations and conclude there is no problem because they see women present in the function. What they observe, however, is that the entry point and the leadership level offer two contrasting perspectives of representation. Women make up approximately 40 per cent of the supply chain workforce, yet in 2025 only 11 per cent of chief supply chain officers (CSCOs) are women, back to the level last seen in 2019.[1] This gap represents both a diversity challenge and a strategic vulnerability that threatens the profession's ability to meet the demands of an increasingly complex global landscape.

Drawing on a decade of experience in executive search and talent advisory within supply chain leadership, the author argues that the profession is systematically under-utilising half of its available talent pool. In an era defined by polycrisis, where organisations face simultaneous disruptions across supply chains, geopolitics, climate, and technology, diverse thinking is essential. Addressing gender imbalance in leadership is therefore among the most strategically significant actions supply chain organisations can take.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE: MAPPING THE GENDER GAP

Women's participation in supply chain management shows reasonable representation at entry and mid-levels but falls away sharply as seniority increases. Women currently comprise approximately 40–41 per cent of the global supply chain workforce, representing modest growth from 39 per cent several years ago. This baseline figure often leads to the perception that gender balance has been achieved, a dangerous assumption that masks a very different reality at leadership levels.

Senior executives demonstrate this blind spot repeatedly. CSCOs frequently assert that their organisations do not have a 'women problem' because they see female colleagues around them. This perception gap often stems from a lack of transparency in representation data at each hierarchical level. When organisations report only headline workforce diversity figures (the 40 per cent baseline), rather than disaggregated metrics by seniority, leaders form their judgments based on anecdotal observation rather than systematic analysis. What becomes obscured is the steep drop-off above the manager level, where female peers become increasingly scarce. They observe a healthy base, not the attrition

that follows. The funnel narrows sharply after first-line management and becomes a cliff at executive level.

Consider the progression in Table 1. The data reveals a distorted pattern: steady participation at entry level, a step down at manager, another at director and vice president, and a sharp decline at CSCO level. Women held 26 per cent of supply chain C-suite roles in 2023, up from 19 per cent in 2022. Yet by 2025 that figure had fallen to just 11 per cent, erasing years of progress in a single reporting period.[5]

The first-line manager level is where one can evidence what is referred to as the 'broken rung' in broader workforce research,[6] which represents the critical entry point into formal leadership. Where women are not promoted here in proportionate numbers, the pipeline for all senior roles naturally shrinks at each successive level but still needs to remain representative if diversity is to be maintained consistently. The recent 3 percentage point decline is therefore not a minor statistical footnote, it is a leading indicator of future executive representation.

Supply chain's 11 per cent female CSCO representation significantly underperforms the broader economy, where women hold approximately 40 per cent of manager roles and 26 per cent of C-suite positions.[7] Supply chain lags behind human resources (HR), marketing, and finance. Research across European and North American corporations consistently identifies supply chain leadership among the least gender-diverse executive functions, second only to chief executive officer (CEO) roles.[8]

The picture varies considerably by geography and industry. In Europe's top 500 companies, only 13 per cent of CSCOs are women.[9] Consumer-facing industries, particularly retail, beauty, and fast-moving consumer goods, demonstrate better representation, while traditional industrial sectors such as manufacturing, energy, and heavy logistics continue to struggle with deeply embedded cultural barriers to women's advancement.

PROGRESS AND SETBACKS: WHY MOMENTUM STALLED

In 2022–2023, many organisations made public commitments to gender balance following heightened attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the wake of global social movements and pandemic-era workforce challenges. As Dana Stiffler of Gartner observed, without continued CSCO engagement and accountability, such commitments risk becoming performative rather than substantive.[10]

Delegating diversity responsibility to HR compounds the problem. While HR professionals play a crucial role in designing inclusive systems, meaningful change requires supply chain leaders

TABLE 1 Women's participation progression

Level	*2022–2023*	*2024–2025*	*Change*
Overall workforce	~40%	~40%	Stable
First-line managers	~32%	~29%	−3%
Directors	~30%	~28%	−2%
Vice presidents	~25%	~23%	−2%
C-Suite (CSCO/CPO)	26%	11%	−15%

Source: Data compiled from Gartner 2023–2025 surveys;[2] AWESOME 2025 report;[3] and Heidrick & Struggles 2024[4] analysis

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themselves to champion it. When a CSCO treats diversity as an HR initiative rather than a strategic priority, the signal that cascades through the organisation is clear: this is not central to our mission.

Since 2020, supply chain organisations have faced relentless pressure: pandemic disruptions, geopolitical tensions, inflation, trade policy upheaval, sustainability mandates, and technological transformation. In this environment of perpetual crisis (the polycrisis), initiatives perceived as discretionary become vulnerable. Treating gender diversity as optional is a critical miscalculation. Research consistently demonstrates that diverse leadership teams make better decisions, drive innovation, and improve financial performance.[11]

There is also a political dimension. The rollback of DEI initiatives, particularly in the US, has created uncertainty, with some organisations retreating from public commitments even while privately acknowledging that the business case remains sound.

The structural barriers, meanwhile, go unaddressed. Pay equity initiatives have stalled, flexible work programmes have been scaled back as return-to-office (RTO) mandates increase, and investment in women's leadership development has declined.[12] Representation does not improve through passive goodwill. It requires deliberate action: pay parity, flexible working arrangements, sponsorship programmes, and talent processes redesigned to mitigate bias.

The consequences compound over time. The mathematics of pipeline attrition are unforgiving: losses at first-line manager level today translate into an absence of female directors tomorrow, and a dearth of female CSCOs a decade hence. In the author's experience working across executive search, organisations that fail to act decisively now risk locking in a leadership deficit that will take a generation to reverse.

THE MID-CAREER PINCH POINT

The data is unambiguous. First-time mothers experience significant and persistent reductions in earnings and career progression, documented in the literature as the 'motherhood penalty'.[13] Fathers experience no equivalent penalty and may benefit from a 'fatherhood premium', being perceived as more stable and committed following parenthood. This foundational inequity shapes a recurring pattern in women's mid-career progression in supply chain management.

Maternity leave serves as a prime example. While female professionals are away, male peers continue to gain experience, build relationships with senior leadership, and secure international assignments. Upon return, equally capable female staff find that opportunities have been lost during their absence.

Such exclusions are frequently framed as protective. Decision makers assume, often with good intentions, that a new mother will not want additional work demands, given her family responsibilities. Her male colleagues, who may also be new parents, face no such assumptions. Female professionals taking a second period of parental leave then face the same cycle. These incremental gaps accumulate, making progression to senior leadership increasingly difficult.

The operational nature of much supply chain work deepens the problem. Warehouse management, production line oversight, and logistics coordination often require physical presence, shift work, or round-the-clock availability

that does not easily accommodate flexible hours. Since women continue to carry the majority of caregiving responsibilities in most households, workplace policies assuming workers have no external obligations will systematically disadvantage them.

The cultural dimension compounds the structural one. Men in supply chain organisations frequently decline extended paternity leave out of concern for career repercussions, perceiving such leave as incompatible with expectations of commitment and ambition. This dynamic is not equitable for men either. Where cultural norms prevent men from sharing caregiving responsibilities, the burden falls more heavily on women, reinforcing the perception that career interruption is a female phenomenon. The absence of visible role models using parental leave at senior levels perpetuates this cycle.

Recent data points to a sharp rise in burnout as a reason women leave supply chain roles mid-career. In Gartner's research, burnout as a top three reason for women's departure nearly doubled from 14 per cent to 33 per cent in a single year.[14,15] This reflects the 'second shift' phenomenon, widely documented in sociological research: many women work full-time in demanding supply chain roles, then return home to shoulder the majority of domestic responsibilities. The cumulative stress of two full-time obligations, one paid and one unpaid, becomes unsustainable where employers offer little flexibility or support.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic forced many organisations to adopt flexible work arrangements, and for many working parents that flexibility proved transformative. As RTO mandates have since rolled back those arrangements without equivalent replacement, the pressure has returned, and in many cases intensified. The stark choice now facing many professionals is between continuing at an unsustainable pace or seeking employment elsewhere.

This represents a talent loss at the worst possible moment. The factors outlined earlier — protective exclusion, lack of visible role models, inflexible workplace structures — combine to drive experienced professionals out of the pipeline precisely when they would be entering senior leadership consideration. This occurs not due to any deficit in capability or commitment, but because prevailing workplace structures make continuation untenable. The loss is particularly acute given the polycrisis facing supply chain management: organisations need diverse leadership perspectives to navigate simultaneous disruptions across geopolitics, climate, technology, and global trade, yet are systematically losing the very talent required to meet these challenges.

CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS: CONFRONTING THE SYSTEM

Beyond individual career challenges, systemic cultural factors hinder women's advancement in supply chain. These barriers reflect what institutional theory describes as the preservation of established structures: those who have succeeded within existing norms tend to maintain them, often unconsciously, even when those same structures disadvantage others. Such barriers are frequently invisible to those who benefit from the status quo, yet profoundly shape who progresses and who does not.

The perception gap

The perception gap is perhaps the most stubborn barrier of all. At the CSCMP

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conference, a senior male supply chain leader insisted there was no gender problem in Belgian supply chain, holding this view sincerely despite data demonstrating that Belgian supply chain leadership is overwhelmingly male. His perception, formed by the visibility of some female colleagues around him, bore little relation to statistical reality.

Many established leaders share this blind spot. They do not recognise bias because they do not experience it personally. They do not identify structural barriers because those barriers do not impede their own progression. This is not malicious in intent, but where senior leaders do not acknowledge that a problem exists, they will not drive solutions. Without that commitment, systemic change remains out of reach.

Unconscious bias and protective exclusion

One of the subtlest yet most consequential barriers is protective exclusion: withholding stretch assignments or high-profile opportunities from women on the assumption that they would not welcome additional demands given their family responsibilities. Such decisions are frequently well-intentioned, yet place women on a slower developmental trajectory without their knowledge or consent.

Unconscious bias surfaces in everyday culture too. Humour that reinforces gendered stereotypes normalises assumptions about the division of professional and domestic responsibilities. These small moments accumulate into an environment that signals, subtly but persistently, who belongs and who does not. What women in supply chain leadership seek is not special treatment, but equal access to opportunity and consistent professional respect.

Structural barriers, however, do not operate in isolation from individual agency. Research suggests that women are less likely than male peers to put themselves forward for stretch assignments, advocate visibly for promotion, or signal ambition explicitly to senior decision makers.[16]

The structural conditions that produce this reticence are themselves a product of gendered socialisation, but self-advocacy and deliberate visibility remain meaningful levers. Organisations that create conditions for ambition to be expressed openly, and women who actively utilise those conditions, are together more likely to disrupt the pattern of protective exclusion than either can achieve alone.

The sponsorship gap and informal networks

Senior roles are rarely filled through formal processes alone. Much of career advancement is shaped by informal networks: professional social events, after-work gatherings, and the tendency of senior executives to advocate for those who remind them of themselves. Where most senior leaders are male, these networks naturally and systematically advantage men.

The distinction between mentorship and sponsorship is critical. Mentorship provides guidance; sponsorship actively advances careers through advocacy and promotion. Research demonstrates that men more frequently benefit from sponsorship because they connect more naturally with predominantly male leadership.[17] Women in supply chain receive mentorship in reasonable measure, but far less frequently the active

advocacy that sponsorship represents. The combination of predominantly male leadership and informal sponsorship practices creates structural barriers to women's advancement at the most senior levels.

Rigid requirements and narrow hiring profiles

Organisations frequently impose unnecessarily restrictive requirements for supply chain roles, demanding sector-specific experience where transferable capability would serve equally well. This rigidity excludes talented professionals who have worked in adjacent industries or taken career breaks, and falls disproportionately on women, who are more likely to have non-linear career trajectories.

Many organisations implicitly operate on an 'ideal worker' model:[18] someone continuously available, without external obligations, able to work long hours, relocate on demand, and travel extensively. Rooted in an era when most professionals had a spouse managing all domestic responsibilities, this model systematically disadvantages anyone with significant caregiving obligations, and women continue to carry the majority of those obligations in most households.

Unstructured hiring compounds the problem further. Where organisations rely on networks and intuition rather than objective criteria, decision makers gravitate towards candidates who resemble themselves. Research demonstrates that affinity bias — the tendency to favour candidates with similar backgrounds, experiences, or characteristics — significantly influences hiring decisions, with decision makers often unconsciously preferring candidates who mirror their own profiles.[19] Since most senior decision makers in supply chain are male, this dynamic systematically advantages male candidates. Women, more likely to have career interruptions or cross-industry experience, are penalised by processes that treat such profiles as liabilities rather than assets.

Glass walls: Line versus staff roles

Women in supply chain have historically been channelled into procurement, planning, and customer service, while men have dominated operations, logistics, and technical roles. These invisible barriers, commonly referred to as 'glass walls', confine women to staff and support functions, while men occupy line and operational roles with greater frequency.

This matters, because the path to the top typically runs through operational leadership. Chief operating officer (COO) and CSCO roles require direct profit and loss responsibility, operational experience, and demonstrated ability to manage complex assets and teams. Where women are tracked into functions that do not provide this experience, they are disadvantaged in competition for executive roles regardless of their capabilities.[20]

Where women do occupy frontline operational roles, however, the evidence is encouraging. Female first-line managers shift team dynamics constructively, and both male and female employees report preferring more gender-balanced operational environments. The growth of e-commerce has broadened access to entry-level operational roles for women, contributing to the relative gender balance seen at workforce level. Sustaining that balance as professionals progress through the hierarchy is where the real organisational opportunity lies.

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The STEM pipeline constraint

The gender gap in supply chain leadership has its roots in patterns established long before individuals enter the workforce. From childhood, subtle but persistent social reinforcements steer girls and boys towards different interests and aspirations. By the time students reach university, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) cohorts are predominantly male, and the technical supply chain pipelines that follow reflect this imbalance. Only around 25 per cent of engineering graduates in most developed economies are women, directly constraining the talent pool for supply chain roles that increasingly demand technical fluency.

The confidence gap that emerges from gendered socialisation is well documented. Girls who demonstrate assertiveness are more frequently characterised as difficult or bossy, while boys displaying equivalent behaviour are described as confident or showing leadership potential.[21] By the time organisations are recruiting for supply chain roles requiring decisiveness and technical acumen, the imbalance is already deeply embedded.

There are signs of progress. In the UK, girls now account for nearly half of all science A-level entries, and female applications to university STEM courses are increasing steadily.[22] Nevertheless, physics, computing, and further mathematics remain male-dominated at A-level, with women comprising just 24 per cent of physics students and 18.6 per cent of computing students.[23] Confidence remains a barrier, with over half of girls reporting insecurity about mathematics compared to just over 40 per cent of boys.[24]

For organisations, part of the solution lies in rethinking how talent is assessed. Broadening hiring criteria to focus on transferable analytical and problem-solving capabilities, rather than specific technical credentials, would significantly expand the available talent pool and access potential that is currently overlooked.

Masculine workplace cultures and resistance to change

Workplace culture has a profound influence on who advances and who does not. Where leadership teams are homogeneous, there is limited organisational empathy for employees managing dual-career households or caregiving responsibilities. Where professional bonding revolves around pursuits that disproportionately attract male participation, women are quietly excluded from the informal relationships that drive career progression.

Institutional theory provides a framework for understanding this persistence. Organisations tend to maintain established structures, norms, and practices that have historically enabled success, even when those same structures create barriers for others.[25] In supply chain management, this manifests as resistance to cultural transformation that would challenge long-standing assumptions about leadership and career progression.[26]

Certain industries have deeply ingrained cultures that resist transformation. Oil and gas, heavy manufacturing, automotive, and industrial equipment developed over decades during which virtually all leaders were male, frequently following established family pathways into the trade. This generational continuity embedded an assumption that career prioritisation was a male prerogative. The institutional

preservation of these norms occurs not through active exclusion but through the unconscious reproduction of familiar patterns and practices.[27] Changing such cultures requires sustained leadership commitment, willingness to confront uncomfortable truths, and resilience when progress stalls.

Research demonstrates, however, that board and leadership diversity can drive substantive organisational change, including stronger commitment to sustainability and broader stakeholder considerations.[28] The grounds for optimism are therefore real. Younger supply chain professionals hold markedly different expectations regarding work–life integration and gender equity than their predecessors. The strategic question for organisations is whether they will adapt quickly enough to retain this talent, or whether cultural inertia will drive it towards more progressive employers.

The self-reinforcing cycle

These factors collectively create a self-reinforcing cycle. When women see few female leaders, they find it harder to envision that path for themselves. When leadership is overwhelmingly male, the culture reflects it. When few women advance, the unfounded perception grows that women are simply not suited to supply chain leadership. There is no evidence for this conclusion, but the pattern sustains the perception. Left unaddressed, male-dominated leadership reproduces itself.

Women who reach senior supply chain positions, however, carry real influence in disrupting this cycle. Research consistently demonstrates that visible female leaders have a measurable impact on the aspirations and progression rates of women below them.[29] Senior women who cultivate their visibility, mentor emerging talent, and build deliberate professional networks serve not only their own careers but the broader pipeline. In this sense, fostering female role models is one of the most practical tools available for accelerating change.

BRIGHT SPOTS: WHERE PROGRESS IS HAPPENING

Certain areas within supply chain show notably better female representation, and understanding why offers insights that can be replicated more broadly.

Female representation is stronger in procurement, strategic sourcing, demand planning, and inventory management than in operations or logistics. These functions share common characteristics: predominantly office-based, analytical, and collaborative, requiring negotiation, relationship management, and communication. Care is warranted against overgeneralising these patterns into stereotypes; women are demonstrably capable in technical and operational roles. Research suggests that cultures valuing collaboration and participation may better align with leadership styles more commonly associated with women, although such associations should be interpreted carefully to avoid reinforcing gender essentialism.[30]

Consumer-facing industries show notably better representation than industrial or manufacturing sectors. Estée Lauder Companies is frequently cited as an exemplar, with women comprising a majority of their supply chain workforce and approaching parity at leadership level, achieved through deliberate structural interventions including women's networks, external partnerships, and sustained leadership commitment.[31] Approximately 25 per cent of supply

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chain vice president roles in consumer and retail are held by women, nearly double the 13 per cent rate in industrial manufacturing,[32] consistent with broader evidence linking gender-diverse leadership to improved performance in customer-facing contexts.[33]

Organisations achieving better representation share common characteristics: formal mentoring networks, leadership development programmes, employee resource groups, and structured sponsorship initiatives that counteract the informal network-driven advancement which advantages men.[34]

Female representation at senior levels is also associated with stronger representation throughout the hierarchy.[35] Female CSCOs tend to build more gender-diverse teams, serve as visible evidence that advancement is achievable, and actively sponsor other women. The multiplier effect of a single woman reaching CSCO level can influence the trajectories of many careers below her.

PERSISTENT GAPS: WHERE WOMEN REMAIN UNDER-REPRESENTED

While certain areas show progress, others remain stubbornly resistant. Understanding where women are absent and why is essential for targeted intervention.

Operations, logistics, and warehousing

Frontline operational roles, including plant supervisors, warehouse managers, and transportation coordinators, remain heavily male-dominated. Since the path to COO and CSCO typically runs through operational leadership, this matters strategically.

Young women rarely see female role models in these positions and do not envision these paths for themselves. Rotating shifts present a structural incompatibility with caregiving responsibilities that disproportionately affects women, and warehouse and logistics environments can carry cultural legacies that are unwelcoming to women who do enter. Without deliberate effort to address both, women who join often do not stay.

The picture is improving. Gartner's 2024 study found frontline female representation increased, driven by targeted recruitment and greater flexibility in shift scheduling.[36] Advances in automation and artificial intelligence (AI) are also reducing the physical demands historically associated with operational roles, broadening access for women and other under-represented groups alike.

Since operational experience is frequently a prerequisite for senior leadership, increasing female representation at the frontline should, where organisations actively support progression, yield stronger representation at executive level over time.

Engineering and technical roles

Positions requiring STEM qualifications consistently see fewer female candidates. Where organisations insist on engineering or computer science degrees as baseline requirements, and women comprise only around 25 per cent of engineering graduates in most developed economies, the talent pool is constrained from the outset. This is particularly significant as automation, systems thinking, and data-driven decision making become increasingly central to supply chain roles.

Change is underway. Organisations are working to attract female talent

through graduate fairs, careers outreach, and early talent programmes, while some are proactively recruiting from transferable disciplines. Schools are making STEM subjects more accessible to girls by emphasising real-world impact and problem solving. In the UK, girls now account for nearly half of all science A-level entries,[37] and female applications to university STEM courses are increasing steadily.[38] Physics, computing, and further mathematics remain male-dominated, however, with women comprising just 24 per cent of physics students and 18.6 per cent of computing students,[39] and confidence remains a barrier, with over half of girls reporting insecurity about mathematics compared to just over 40 per cent of boys.[40]

For organisations, broadening hiring criteria to assess transferable analytical and problem-solving capabilities rather than specific technical credentials would significantly expand the available talent pool.

Global supply chains: Participation without power

On a global scale, women constitute large portions of the labour force in apparel manufacturing and agriculture, yet hold virtually no leadership positions within those supply chains. Women comprise approximately 36–38 per cent of the global agrifood system workforce, yet occupy predominantly the lowest-paid and least secure roles.[41] In apparel supply chains, the majority of factory workers are women, often facing poor conditions and minimal advancement opportunities.[42] This pattern of participation without power, where women are present in the workforce but absent from positions of influence, represents a distinct form of inequity that demands conscious structural intervention.

STRATEGIES FOR CLOSING THE GAP: A ROADMAP FOR ACTION

The evidence points to a clear conclusion: without deliberate, structured intervention, the systemic barriers to women's advancement in supply chain leadership will persist. Gender diversity that is not embedded in leadership scorecards and accountability frameworks will not be treated as a strategic priority.

The following 11 strategies represent the highest-impact interventions within an organisation's control. They are not about intent, but execution. While the broader cultural shift — challenging the socialisation patterns that shape who believes they belong in leadership — requires change beyond any single organisation's boundaries, the question of who gets hired, promoted, and retained is decisively shaped inside them.

1. *Make it a CSCO goal — tie targets to scorecards and bonuses*: CSCOs and executive teams must treat gender diversity as a strategic business priority, not an HR initiative. Measurable targets should be set, tied to executive scorecards and compensation, with board-level discussion of progress on a regular basis. When leaders' incentives depend partly on building diverse teams, behaviour changes. Without this foundational commitment from the top, all other interventions will struggle to gain traction.
2. *Build inclusive managers — train, test with scenarios, review outcomes*: Systemic change requires managers throughout the organisation to lead inclusively. This means equipping

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them to recognise biases, using scenario-based learning to reflect real-world situations, and introducing accountability through regular reviews of hiring, promotion, and team composition decisions. Gartner's research identifies this as among the most effective tactics, particularly for first-line managers.[43] Inclusive leadership is not innate; it is learnable and must be reinforced.

3. *Normalise flexibility for everyone*: The single most impactful intervention is genuine flexibility in how, when, and where work gets done. Research shows flexibility to be the most effective initiative for attracting and retaining women in frontline roles, outperforming even compensation increases.[44] This includes flexible scheduling, remote and hybrid options, equitable parental leave, part-time and job-share options for senior roles, and subsidised childcare. Crucially, flexibility must be normalised for everyone, not positioned as a 'mother's benefit'. When men use flexibility as readily as women, it ceases to function as a career penalty and becomes a standard way of working.
4. *Design re-entry pathways*: Career paths are rarely linear, and organisations that insist on treating them as such will lose talent unnecessarily. Structured RTO programmes offering skills refreshers, mentoring, and supported reintegration, enable experienced professionals to re-enter the pipeline. Prioritising analytical thinking, leadership potential, and strategic vision over uninterrupted tenure opens doors to candidates that more rigid approaches would miss entirely.
5. *Install sponsorship, not just mentorship*: Mentorship provides guidance; sponsorship advances careers. Structured sponsorship programmes that connect emerging female talent with senior advocates help counteract the bias of informal networks. Given that organisational power remains predominantly male, this requires active engagement from male leaders. Research demonstrates that women with sponsors advance at rates comparable to men, while those without advance more slowly.[45]
6. *Fix employer value proposition (EVP) and pay equity*: Regular pay equity audits, transparent advancement criteria, and the visible promotion of female leaders in employer branding are essential. Workplaces that are excellent for women tend to be strong environments overall.[46] These are not zero-sum interventions; they raise standards across the workforce.
7. *De-bias hiring*: Improved recruitment is the primary driver of increased female representation across most levels.[47] The mechanics matter: diverse candidate slates, gender-neutral job descriptions, structured interviews, and diverse interview panels all improve outcomes. One of the most significant sources of bias, however, sits upstream in how roles are defined. Job specifications that assume rigid hours, constant travel, or full-time presence narrow the talent pool before the hiring process even begins. Embedding flexibility into role design (through hybrid working, adjusted travel expectations, or openness to alternative working patterns) signals that performance is measured by outcomes rather than presence and expands access to female talent. Intentional process changes produce better

outcomes. Without rethinking role design, however, organisations risk redistributing the same limited talent rather than expanding it.

8. *Backbone supports — childcare, travel policies, job shares*: Practical infrastructure matters. Onsite or subsidised childcare, lactation facilities, family-friendly travel policies, RTO transitions, and emergency backup care remove practical obstacles that disproportionately affect women. These measures signal genuine commitment and enable professionals to sustain demanding careers alongside other responsibilities.
9. *Enable visibility and advocacy without penalty*: Organisations should support the development of self-advocacy, visibility, and leadership presence through coaching and development programmes, while ensuring that ambition is recognised consistently, regardless of style. The burden should not sit solely with individuals; environments must reward contribution and potential equitably. Senior women also play a critical role by leveraging their visibility, sharing networks, and acting as accessible role models. Progress accelerates when individual agency and organisational systems operate in alignment.
10. *Engage men as co-owners — model leave, share 'office housework'*: Gender equity requires visible male leadership. Senior men must actively sponsor female talent, model the use of flexible working and parental leave, and challenge exclusionary behaviours. At peer level, addressing imbalances in informal responsibilities and 'office housework' is equally important. When workplaces judge performance by outcomes rather than presence, both men and women gain greater freedom to manage their professional and personal responsibilities effectively.
11. *Measure and tell the story*: What gets measured gets managed. Organisations should track representation by level, promotion rates, retention, pay equity, and utilisation of flexibility programmes. Time-to-promotion and progression rates by gender offer particularly valuable insight. Transparency creates accountability. Sharing data internally, and where appropriate externally, enables organisations to assess progress, refine interventions, and build credibility. Celebrating milestones, such as the appointment of a first female plant manager or CSCO, not only recognises individuals but shapes the aspirations of those following.

MOVING TOWARDS A BALANCED FUTURE

The question posed at the CSCMP conference, 'Is there a supply/demand balance for women in supply chain?', deserves a direct answer. There is not. Women comprise 40 per cent of the supply chain workforce but only 11 per cent of CSCOs. Gains that took years to accumulate were reversed within a single reporting period when organisational commitment wavered. This is not a plateau; it is regression.

What is required is not further awareness, but execution. Organisations that continue to position gender diversity as secondary to operational priorities fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the challenge. Leadership diversity is not separate from operational performance or competitive advantage; it is a driver of both.

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The goal is not preferential treatment, but structural fairness: a profession in which flexibility does not signal reduced ambition, where a father taking extended parental leave is unremarkable, and where a mother's career break is recognised as an experience that strengthens, rather than diminishes, leadership capability. Achieving this requires leaders to move beyond the assumption that the absence of visible problems reflects the absence of real ones.

There are, however, genuine grounds for optimism. A new generation of supply chain professionals brings fundamentally different expectations of work, leadership, and inclusion. They are less willing to accept rigid or exclusionary environments, and more prepared to move where those expectations are not met. Organisations that fail to adapt will not retain this talent.

The central issue is not a lack of female talent, nor a lack of organisational intent. It is a failure to translate intent into consistent, system-level action. The organisations that address this gap by redesigning roles, rethinking career paths, and embedding accountability will access a broader, more capable leadership pool.

The supply chain profession now faces a clear choice. It can continue to treat gender imbalance as an external constraint, or recognise it as an internal design challenge. Those that choose the latter will not only close the representation gap, but strengthen their ability to lead in an increasingly complex and demanding global environment.

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