

# Why Gender Equality Still Matters for Corporate Affairs Amid the DEI Pullback

As International Women's Day calls us to "Accelerate Action," Corporate Affairs leaders must navigate shifting DEI priorities while ensuring diversity remains a business advantage. We explore gender equality in Corporate Affairs, with insights from industry leaders on the steps needed to drive real impact.

This year marks the 114th International Women's Day (IWD). Considering the annual event started in a handful of European countries in 1911 and has grown to global significance, there is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality.

The tenth edition of McKinsey's [Women in the Workplace report](#) found that some progress has been made. Women now hold 29% of C-suite positions in US businesses, compared to 17% in 2015. Progress is not the same as parity, and the talent pipeline remains a challenge – women's representation at the managerial level has grown by just 2% over the same period.

In APAC, data from [the UN](#) shows that the proportion of managerial positions held by women in 20 Asia-Pacific countries falls below the global average of 28%. This highlights persistent gender disparities across the region, despite efforts to improve equality in the workplace.

It's fitting then that the theme of this year's IWD is "Accelerate Action." What actions should be prioritised to hasten meaningful progress? What is shaping and slowing progress? And what does it mean for today's Corporate Affairs (CA) leaders?

## Trump and the dwindling of DEI

In 2025, the discourse around gender equality in the world of work has been dramatically impacted by the second Trump presidency.

The president signed far-reaching executive orders on his first day in office to ban DEI programs and restore "merit-based opportunity" in the US government and its private sector contractors.

The impact of the orders continues to be felt, with many corporations [cutting DEI programs](#) and targets. Some CA leaders have observed a general 'pullback' on DEI commitments, extending well beyond the US. For example, a recent proposal to [expand diversity reporting rules](#) for ASX-listed companies was blocked by Australian business groups despite support from the country's superannuation funds.

Even before Trump's return to the White House, [research](#) showed a shift in corporate language, with a 59% rise in neutral terms like 'belonging' and a 22% decline in the use of 'DEI' and 'diversity.' Professional communicators note that in some cases it is receding from the corporate vocabulary altogether.

In the current climate, the language used matters. McKinsey recently announced it will pursue a "diverse meritocracy," despite also advocating for [diversity as a competitive advantage](#). Citigroup has removed its "[aspirational representation](#)" goals and renamed its "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Talent Management" team to "Talent Management and Engagement." Its CEO Jane Fraser has bucked the trend set by other

financial institutions for repealing remote or hybrid working post-Covid, a policy that helps it attract many working mothers to its talent pool. “We are, after all, in a service business,” said Fraser in a memo to employees, “which means attracting top talent and ensuring they thrive at Citi is essential to our performance.”

### **Diverse voices as a source of advantage**

CA leaders may find themselves having to balance sensitivities in language and messaging around DEI while also staying true to their company’s identity, purpose and commercial goals.

After all, it’s been demonstrated that companies with more diverse employees are more likely to outperform less diverse businesses, create more revenue from innovation and attract a wider talent base.

Qantas is one APAC organisation that recently reaffirmed its diversity and inclusion policy after announcing strong financial results. CEO Vanessa Hudson commented: “We will not be changing our policy because we believe our policy has been good for business and will continue to be good for business.”

Many CA leaders recognise that diversity – including gender equality – is a necessity for successful businesses and successful CA functions. A CA team comprising a homogenous group of individuals could struggle to connect with an increasingly broad range of stakeholders and issues.

“Gender equality in Corporate Affairs and communications isn’t just the right thing to do, it’s a business imperative,” says Stephanie Roberts, Head of Global Communications at Hitachi Industrial Equipment Systems. “Diverse teams drive innovation, growth and resilience. Corporate Affairs and communications teams must connect with diverse audiences. To do that effectively, we need diverse voices at the table. We can’t meet the needs of our many stakeholders if we all share the same perspective.”

### **“Without gender equality in this field, we risk telling an incomplete story”**

Gender equality enables a CA function to reflect, understand and influence the range of stakeholders within which their companies operate. “Corporate Affairs is about shaping influence, driving policy and building trust,” says Ching Yee Wong, Vice President of Communications at Marriott International. “Without gender equality in this field, we risk telling an incomplete story – one that overlooks critical perspectives and fails to reflect the diverse world we serve.”

### **Actions and impact over targets**

CA leaders must consider the reputational dimension of their company's DEI stance and, for those committed to gender equality, partner with HR on initiatives that improve equality in the CA function and the wider organisation.

Like many corporate functions, CA has experienced positive change in gender equality in recent decades.“

Over the 30 years of my career I've seen significant change in Corporate Affairs,” reflects Joanne Lilley, Director of Content Programming at CEDA, the Committee for Economic Development of Australia.

“The field has always had a high percentage of female representation – but in my experience was historically led by men. Progress over the past three decades means that women are now regularly in corporate affairs leadership roles.”

**“To accelerate meaningful progress, we need structural change”**

CA leaders grappling with these issues stress that setting gender equality targets – regardless of whether or how they are externally communicated – is not enough. Ambitious efforts are needed to create change that moves faster than what has seemed like a glacial pace.

“Representation is important but it's not just about hitting quotas; it's about bringing fresh perspectives and a broader range of experiences to enhance strategic thinking and drive better results,” says Ching Yee.

“To accelerate meaningful progress, we need structural change like pathways to leadership, sponsorship over mentorship and accountability at the top.”

Stephanie agrees that significant action is needed to progress equality and to create more resilient businesses. “To accelerate change, we need bold action,” she says.

“Companies must set measurable diversity goals, ensure fair advancement opportunities and actively mentor and sponsor women at all levels. Gender equality isn't just about numbers – it's about impact. And to build stronger organisations, we need to take action now.”

Achieving gender equality and recognising it as a business advantage requires more than just rhetoric – it demands decisive action and sustained commitment.

As we mark this year's International Women's Day and the call to “Accelerate Action,” the slow progress in leadership representation underscores the need for bold steps, not just targets.

Amid shifting DEI dynamics, CA leaders have a critical role in ensuring that gender equality remains a strategic advantage, driving meaningful impact across organisations and industries.