Continuum of care to advance women as leaders in male-dominated industries

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Abstract

Women who enter professions that have previously been male-dominated often struggle to rise through ranks to leadership positions. Herein, we present the findings of a 12-month cross-sector intervention focused on embedding practices into organizations to create an inclusive organizational environment that fostered the development of women leaders. The intervention focused on three male-dominated sectors, sport, surgery and trades. Managing the intervention was an Advisory Group that comprised researchers, and leaders from a national member Association and Organization within each sector. The Advisory Group's goal was to provide support and guidance to assist Organizations with the task of changing and challenging their values toward a feminist orientation. Post-intervention interviews were conducted with women leaders and Advisory Group Members, to examine how Organizations can build their capacity to embed practices and policies to encourage women as leaders. Extending on a conceptualization of continuum of care across three focus areas we discuss how capabilities were affirmed through visible and accessible career pathways; the empowering potential of mentoring and networking; and creating cultures of belonging through addressing unconscious bias.

1 | INTRODUCTION

While women are increasingly entering male-dominated sectors their numbers remain low, with even fewer rising into leadership positions. This is particularly so in sectors such as surgery, sport and trades. In Australia, for example, women in the surgical professions are under-represented in both leadership and academic roles such as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and Deans of medical schools (Bismark, et al., 2015; Hutchinson, 2020). In North America, Europe and Oceania, men continue to dominate in senior surgical academic positions and formal clinical leadership roles (Wu et al., 2019). The situation is similar in sport, where the deficit of women leaders in areas such as sport governance has been recognized as a worldwide problem (Evans & Pfister, 2021; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). Further, women's underrepresentation in the skilled trades continues to be particularly stark with women representing only 1%–3% of the workforce in Western nations (Bridges et al., 2022), and there is still a long way to go before gender equality, particularly in leadership is achieved in the sector (Galea et al., 2015). For women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, in other male-dominated industries such as Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine, their leadership aspirations were hindered by hypervisibility, which may have enabled some white women to advance, but marked women of color as "other" and tokens of diversity initiatives (Nash & Moore, 2022). In addition, they were also rendered invisible through social and professional exclusion, which was a constant reminder of their marginalized position (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019).

Women entering male-dominated industries face a range of challenges that present barriers to them advancing as leaders. These include the gendered workplace and masculine cultures which make decisions around having children difficult, and the lack of programs to assist the return to work after parental leave (Huppatz et al., 2019). In addition, women also encounter lack of identifiable career pathways (Bridges et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2019), and availability of mentoring and networking opportunities (Galea et al., 2015). Interventions proposed to assist women overcome these barriers and have often been directed at equipping women with the skills to individually overcome these barriers (Galea & Chappell, 2022). The focus on "fixing women" has been critiqued by feminist organizational theories, as it does little to change or challenge organizational practices (Galea & Chappell, 2022). This suggests the critical need to think differently regarding dominant masculine organizational values and their impact on women. While interventions exist that have broadened the approach to focus on organizational change and personal development, few interventions have challenged the core organizational values that sustain masculine privilege with the exception of Bridges et al. (2023). The important point raised in this research was that challenging gendered practices in male-dominated workplaces requires building organizational resilience (Bridges et al., 2023). Through gender inclusion strategies and adopting a flexible approach, organizations can provide workplaces that foster both organizational and women's resilience (Bridges et al., 2023). Bridges et al. (2023, p. 8, italics in original) argue "resilience is not only a behavior learned by employees, but also a set of behaviors learned and enacted by employees *and* organizations." While we agree with the premise of this approach, we wanted to focus more specifically on how organizations can be informed and supported by an advisory group and industry association to embed practices and policies that value women as equals. Given the persistent and intractable barriers that impede women's progress in male-dominated sectors, forming an Advisory Group was deemed necessary to provide the guidance to challenge and undo systemic gendered biases and practices. Throughout our analysis we highlight the importance of gaining support from industry associations to sustain and champion initiatives over the 12-month period of the intervention. In doing so, we focused on changing organizational values to affirm women's leadership potential and provide support to guide their aspirations. Our aim was therefore to identify commonalities

across sectors, not for comparison purposes, but to propose a continuum of care to guide and provide a multi-level framework for organizations to support women to progress as leaders. Herein, we provide evidence on the effects of an intervention, with a pre- and post-evaluation, focused on embedding practices into organizations in the male-dominated sectors of surgery, trades and sport.

2 | APPROACHES TO ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

It is argued (De Vries, 2015) that a shift from research focusing on how change can occur at an individual level has been made to how senior leaders in organizations can work to embed change. This change creates accountability through systems and processes that support moves toward equality. Organizational change, however, requires executive leaders working to remove the "structural and cultural impediments" that hinder progress toward equality and inclusivity (Rowlands et al., 2020, p. 1280). Strategies arising from an organization and its leadership that create a more gender inclusive culture are key to supporting women in male-dominated industries (Bridges et al., 2022), with senior men and women playing crucial roles in leading organizational change (De Vries, 2015). Building on these insights, the organizational intervention reported herein, includes senior men and women within member Associations and Organizations situated in surgery, trades and sport.

2.1 | Career pathways, mentoring, networking and challenging unconscious bias

Considerable barriers exist on women's pathways toward leadership (Alvinius et al., 2018). For example, in the skilled trades, women indicated while they may be aware of potential pathways they lacked information, and resources to progress their career (Bridges et al., 2022). In addition, women may also lack the necessary capital to advance within the sector and have to negotiate their way through male privilege (Wulff et al., 2021). Likewise, research in sport, also indicates that despite equal opportunity laws and legislation, inequality structures within organizations reinforce biased pathways and impede the progression of women (Darvin et al., 2021). In surgery, the reliance on informal networks and a "tap on the shoulder" created significant barriers to women's progression into leadership roles (Bismark et al., 2015, p. 6). Women surgeons often believed that male colleagues were promoted ahead of them despite having the same qualifications (Lu et al., 2020). Despite increasing numbers of women entering surgical professions, they still encounter discrimination, with overt forms replaced with subtle everyday microaggressions (Ferrari et al., 2022). Women within surgery also face significant challenges to their career progression due to the lack of organizational support that recognizes their parenting or caring responsibilities (Bismark et al., 2015). Similarly, in sport women's choices on their career progression are often influenced by how their organization did or did not support them, and supervisors played a key role (Evans & Pfister, 2021; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019), with entrenched sexism further hindering women's career options (Fink, 2016; Hindman & Walker, 2020).

Mentoring is central to women in surgery overcoming the obstacles to career progression (Hutchinson, 2020), a situation which is replicated in sport (Evans & Pfister, 2021) and trades (Bridges et al., 2022). However, often women struggle to access mentoring (Dashper, 2019) and in, male-dominated sectors a deficit of women mentors, highlights the need for organizations to provide mentoring opportunities (Evans & Pfister, 2021; Hutchinson, 2020). Mentoring programs also need to be long-term, as culture changes within male-dominated sectors, such as the construction industry, requires this type of focus (Rosa et al., 2017). Care must be taken to ensure that women-only mentoring programs do not reinforce gendered discourses, but instead offer opportunities for "women to be the best they can be" (Dashper, 2019, p. 546).

Mentoring can also be a strategy through which women could build networks, which are important for them to progress their leadership options (Dashper, 2019). Yet often these opportunities occur outside working hours,

leading to accessibility difficulties for women with caring responsibilities (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). Informal networks in trades also work to exclude women and hinder their career pathways (Bridges et al., 2022), with the situation being similar in sport (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019) and surgery (Hutchinson, 2020). Peers and colleagues in networks can provide a supportive and more inclusive culture (Mousa et al., 2021). Networks can also enable women to connect with other women leaders (Mousa et al., 2021). Yet within male-dominated sectors women often struggle to access networks to enhance their career opportunities. Hence organizations can assist through providing targeted and formal approaches (Bridges et al., 2023; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Mousa et al., 2021).

Addressing unconscious bias also requires a targeted approach. For example, Williamson and Foley (2018, p. 357) suggest a "staged, iterative approach" that addresses systemic and gendered power relations. To assist with effectiveness, unconscious bias training must be accompanied by measures such as targets to increase the number of women in leadership roles in male-dominated sectors, along with other continuing and multi-level workplace interventions (Williamson & Foley, 2018). Other measures include ensuring recruitment strategies and promotional opportunities are worded to eliminate biases in positions descriptions that may benefit men (Barnes et al., 2020; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). This is a crucial focus as the inherent biases in positions descriptions in male-dominated sectors remain a persistence barrier to women's progression (Tang et al., 2017), illustrating that ongoing practices are required to negate their impact. Other strategies to negate the entrenched biases overlap with the key target areas of career pathways, and mentoring. Formal mentoring programs are used in surgical education to address unconscious bias (Barnes et al., 2020) and have been proposed in the skilled trades to negate the impact of entrenched male networks (Bridges et al., 2023). Flexibility in work practices that account for women's caring responsibilities can assist to address unconscious bias (Barnes et al., 2020; Rosa et al., 2017), and in turn create a culture of belonging.

3 | CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

We extend on a continuum of care (O'Brien et al., 2022) to explore how a values-based approach can assist organizations to support women leaders, particularly in male-dominated workplaces. A continuum of care draws inspiration from the work of feminist theorist Braidotti (2020, p. 468), who proposes a generative framing of affirmation that focuses on how to make the "most of one's powers and capabilities so as to become the most affirmative possible version of what one could be." The affirmative focuses on developing women's capabilities and opportunities through organizational support in the form of accountable policies and embedded practices to ensure career pathways are accessible and visible. The development of capabilities is an approach to equality that concentrates on what women are "able to do and be," when they are afforded organizational resources and opportunities (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 39) to advance as leaders. As Nussbaum further argues in order to ensure the development of capabilities the "material and institutional environment" (2003, p. 55) must provide ways to enable opportunities for women to develop. Responsibility then shifts to providing and creating conditions for change to the organization. As Acker (2006) argues gendered organizational practices and processes continue to recreate inequalities. Challenging these "inequality regimes" (Acker, 2006, p. 442) in organizations can become a way of transforming them toward more inclusive and equitable practices. Yet when gender equality policies are linked to company values, they are more likely to "become entrenched" (Galea et al., 2015, p. 381).

Empowerment, as a relation of care and affirmation, is linked to the development of potential (Braidotti, 2010) through mentoring and networking. Empowerment is thus, not an individualized endeavor, rather one in which organizations work to make changes that support women's career aspirations and lessen their sense of isolation through connections with others (Allison, 2016). Executive leaders, women, their mentors and those within their networks can work together to produce "something more sustainable, more life enhancing" (Braidotti, 2010, p. 53) as a way to actively support women into leadership positions. As Allison (2016, p. 250) notes, empowerment builds feelings of "excitement, hope and confidence." Through this support, and entering into "meaningful relationships"

(Nussbaum, 2003, p. 42) with others, the empowering potential of mentoring and networking offers further opportunities to develop women's capabilities. Connecting with others through mentoring and networking can also foster a sense of belonging, but without undoing the gendered practices and biases that persist in male-dominated industries it may be difficult to create cultures of belonging. Values that are inclusive and create connections with others are also empowering (Braidotti, 2010).

Belonging is process orientated, generating questions about how it is produced and how it works (Braidotti, 2010). This then leads to consideration of how unconscious bias and sexism can be challenged to create cultures of belonging that are alternatives to the current practices and lead to the "transmutation of values" (Braidotti, 2010, p. 45). Biases, along with overt discrimination, continue to plague women's advancement in male-dominated industries. The locations within which these acts of discrimination occur, need to be challenged through situated and accountable practices (Braidotti, 2010). Feeling a sense of belonging, ease and confidence can be fostered through inclusive organizational practices, breaking down gender barriers and assumptions and addressing unconscious bias. Practices and values need to be embedded, reinforced, and sustained over time, which will not only benefit women, but create a more inclusive and supportive workplace for all.

4 | CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Focused on embedding practices into organizations to create an environment inclusive for women leaders in male-dominated industries, we present the results of a case-study intervention. Case-studies allow for an in-depth exploration of a "case," over time, with the goal of providing new learnings or understandings (Yin, 2012). Each sector and individuals were bounded cases, and the goal was not to conduct a cross-sector analysis but, gain a deeper insight (Yin, 2012) into how practices could be embedded to allow women to advance as leaders. We utilized the case study in an evaluative mode drawing on interviews conducted with industry Advisory Group members and women leaders within each organization post-intervention to gauge the impact of the intervention (Yin, 2012). As it has been identified that workplace equality is difficult to attain (Rowlands et al., 2020), we formed an Advisory Group whose goal was to identify intervention target areas, provide support, share insights and set intervention objectives to prompt and sustain organizational change within the three sectors. Advisory Group members comprised the CEO or senior leader from the leading national member Associations in sport, trade and surgery, and who identified an organization in each of their sectors keen to encourage women as leaders. The CEO or senior leader from each of these organizations accepted the invitation to join the Advisory Group and activate the intervention. The authors (research team) were also part of this Advisory Group and worked together to implement a targeted intervention. The Advisory Group met regularly to discuss the intervention, negotiate challenges, provide support and share ideas on implementing strategies.

Our intervention was the second phase of a larger project (O'Brien et al., 2023). Data from the first phase comprised the conduct of surveys and interviews with current and potential women leaders in each organization, findings provided Advisory Group members with a snapshot of current practices that were working and where these women needed organizational assistance. In addition, a desktop review was conducted in Phase one, to identify global organizational approaches that showed evidence of good practice and success to increase the number of women in leadership positions. From these two data sources the research team proposed three key focus areas to the Advisory Group to implement in the intervention as part of Phase two: Career pathways; mentoring; networking and unconscious bias. These key areas were discussed and accepted, with each sector identifying tailored practices within these focus areas, gained from the two data sources, to embed and sustain during and beyond the intervention. Examples of practices implemented include a dedicated career pathway webpage; focused mentoring programs; sector networking events and programs to address unconscious bias. It is pertinent to note that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on how organizations were able to implement planned interventions.

4.1 | Methods

An email invitation was sent by the Organizational managers to current or emerging women leaders to partake in the abovementioned survey. The women indicated in their survey responses their willingness to participate in semi-structured interviews, with the responses remaining confidential with the research team to ensure they were not identifiable by their manager. Post-intervention, our goal was to interview the same pre-intervention participants. However, we were constrained by several factors, which were in turn compounded by COVID-19. Maintaining confidentiality and reducing any burden on research participants was always a central priority. Confidentiality was crucial, as the research cohort was relatively small, given the low numbers of women in each sector and concerns they expressed regarding potential identification. In addition, an organization within one sector underwent a significant restructure, which saw women either deployed to another department, or leave entirely. Skills shortages, high turnovers in trades (National Skills Commission, 2022), burnout, cessation of elective surgery and redeployment back into general medicine (Royal Australian College of Surgeons, 2020), also led to the attrition of participants.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants (women leaders and Advisory Group industry members). The interviews averaged 45 min and were recorded and transcribed. An interview guide, focused on the three key areas of the intervention, allowed us to narrow the scope of the interview to provide "quality of the dialog" essential for information power (Malterud, et al., 2016, p. 1755). In consequence, six Advisory Group members, two from sport, two trades and two surgery were interviewed. In addition, 12 women participants were interviewed. Two were from sport (both participated in Phase One), three from trades (all participated in Phase One) and seven from surgery (one involved in Phase One). We acknowledge the small number of participants in both groups. However, given the relatively narrow focus of the case-study (Yin, 2012), with its specific goal to seek insights into how organizational changes within the focus areas had impacted women's leadership aspirations, the data gained from these interviews elicited "information power" (Malterud, et al., 2016, p. 1754). Malterud et al. (2016) argue that "the larger the information power the sample holds" the fewer participants required. We also added information power using a theoretical approach that synthesized and extended existing knowledge (Malterud et al., 2016) through a continuum of care lens.

The need to provide rich data essential for information power meant women participants from the three sectors needed to feel safe to speak freely, without the fear of being identified and potentially facing repercussions. Ellard-Gray et al. (2015, p. 3), argue it is often difficult to maintain anonymity and confidentiality when participants "are contained in small communities where members tend to know one another." These researchers further note that in order to protect the identity of a participant, it is important to exercise "extreme caution and attention to maintaining confidentiality" (p. 8). To further maintain confidentiality all participants were assigned pseudonyms. In addition, we have not identified the organizations involved, doing so may compromise participant anonymity, even though they may have left or moved to another department within the organization.

All interviews were transcribed and coded, around the three focus areas using NVivo, with additional codes mapping further points of interest. These initial codes informed the development of our thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We also deployed the three elements of the conceptual approach, affirming capabilities, empowering potential and cultures of belonging (O'Brien et al., 2022), to refine the themes. In this way the analysis informed the conceptual development and vice versa.

Our deep reflection and engagement with data allowed us to concentrate on "patterns of *shared meanings*," rather than definitive truths (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593, italics in original) and connecting these to our conceptual approach. Engaging with the literature on interventions allowed us to challenge and reflect on our assumptions regarding the efficacy and impact of the interventions. At times we returned to the interview data, to ensure context and create "interpretive *stories*" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594, italics in original) that we felt reflected the shared meanings our participants articulated regarding the impacts of the interventions. Our analysis is organized to illustrate the connection to the conceptual approach and the three key target areas.

5 | ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In our first theme, career pathways, we consider how organizations can affirm women's position through increasing their visibility in leadership roles, and how policies can support parental leave and flexible working hours. Through empowering potential, we discuss the possibilities for enhancing women's capabilities through mentoring and networking. Finally, we consider how organizations work to create inclusive cultures of belonging through challenging unconscious bias. While we have highlighted areas of success, we also believe it is valuable to discuss where participants identified that they continued to encounter barriers to their progression. This then offers the opportunity for organizations to build into any planned intervention ways to overcome these issues. Highlighting persistent barriers also reinforces the need for organizations to have the support and input of an industry association, to commence and sustain initiatives.

5.1 | Affirming capabilities through accessible and supportive career pathways

To affirm women's position within their sector several organizations had put in place practices that were designed to render career pathways more accessible and visible. These measures not only offered guidelines for progression, but employees, both women and men, were able to see that career pathways were open to all.

> They need to be able to see it. I think it's been a real change. I think if you brought it up, let's say two, three, four years ago, I think people would've responded … that you were being a bit sensitive, overly sensitive to it. That really has been a big change.
>
> (Vicki, AG)

Previous research has also indicated that increasing women's visibility through formal organizational practices and the provision of resources to identify career pathways were important steps to allow women progress into leadership positions (Alvinius et al., 2018). Creating accessible leadership pathways can provide an environment that not only affirms women's position within the organization, but also offers the opportunity to develop their capabilities and realize their potential (O'Brien et al., 2022).

The significance of increased visibility, as a practice that affirmed women's position on leadership pathways was captured in a comment from Danielle in trades. Danielle indicated it was important the organization initiated and continued to promote opportunities for women: "I've definitely noticed a lot more visibility and, you know, in print media and things like that, really pushing opportunities in, you know, different career pathways for women." An Advisory Group member, also from the trades sector, discussed how pathways were formalized and implemented as an important aspect of the intervention. A series of pathway documents, *Career Pathway Employee Guide*, *Career Pathway Management Guide* and a *Your Career Template* were created in infographic form to illustrate the steps toward career progression.

> I think that's the thing that we did launch at the start of the year, and it's one of those things … that we're just constantly doing. We've had career pathways for a while, we're making them visual, we're making them infographic with changing the pictures to put females in there.
>
> (Peter, AG)

In addition to the career pathway infographics, a *Women in Trades* newsletter, which also ensured that images of women were a key focal point, were used to communicate career opportunities. As Peter's comment implies, the process was one of constant, reinforcing practices, so that over time they "stick" (Galea et al., 2015, p. 381).

Participants also indicated that programs that were targeted at both increasing visibility, but also providing support for women to step up into leadership roles, were invaluable in assisting them to advance their career pathway. Amelia (Sport) commented on the positive impact of a range of leadership programs and initiatives.

> I think there's been a lot of programs put in place, particularly by the [Organization name], which are trying to increase that visibility of and support for women to progress through into leadership positions, which has been really good.

Amelia further explained that she had the opportunity to participate in an emerging leader program as well as leadership workshop series, which she indicated were "really beneficial." At the same time, it is important that these types of programs be framed to realize women's potential and offer support, rather than position women as deficient in leadership skills (Galea & Chappell, 2022).

Programs also need to be bolstered through organizational values and practices that highlight women's achievements and successes, including role models (O'Brien et al., 2022): "So any chance that we can get to amplify someone who's building their career is a good way to demonstrate, it's not just words on a page and just consistently putting that message out is what we try to do" (Peter, AG). In surgery, the member Organization had also increased the number of women on panels and committees, thus, creating visibility of women to highlight potential opportunities for advancement.

> So, over the last 12 months, definitely, there's been a big drive from the [Organization] … to have a lot more sort of visible women on everything from panels to courses to committees, sort of all of that. So, I think that means that when the juniors then go along to all of those, they can sort of see people that are, you know, potentially, you know, they can see themselves sort of being that person in the future.
>
> (Samantha, Surgery)

These practices of affirmation, originating from the organization (Nussbaum, 2003; O'Brien et al., 2022), opened up opportunities for women to visualize potential options for advancement. Organizations must also ensure that positions on panels and committees are remunerated rather than being voluntary, as this may place an additional burden of labor on already time poor women (Monteiro et al., 2023). Increasing the visibility of role models (Botella et al., 2019), and formalized career development pathways, similar to the infographic above, were further suggested as ways to promote and support women's leadership aspirations in other male-dominated industries (Alvinius et al., 2018).

5.1.1 | Parental leave and flexible working hours

For many women, particularly mothers, having access to supportive parental leave, as a practice of affirmation (O'Brien et al., 2022), was an important organizational policy that allowed them to explore opportunities for advancement. During the intervention and now beyond, one of the Advisory Group members spoke of how their Organization had engaged a third-party provider to assist women through all phases of parental leave, including support when returning to work.

> We have improved parts of our parental leave … We've got a better parental leave third party [Provider Name] … that provides assistance to women going into parental leave … So, they provide articles, education.
>
> (Peter, AG)

Organizations had also affirmed women's position through policies that ensured they were not disadvantaged whilst on parental leave (O'Brien et al., 2022). One example, in trades, was guaranteeing access to annual reviews, recognized as important to women's career progression: "They made sure that even if you are on maternity leave, you are still included in your mid-year and end of year review" (Danielle, Trades). Trades also implemented policies to ensure women were not financially disadvantaged when on parental leave.

> So that previously, our paid parental leave, you get paid in a lump sum up front and be heavily taxed on it. They understood that this was probably a disadvantage for us … it's a time when you're not earning an income where you need probably your same wage every fortnight. So, they moved to that model, which is incredible. And was a huge advantage for us.
>
> (Danielle, Trades)

Other practices implemented by Organizations to reduce the impact on women financially, was to match their superannuation contribution: "So, we've put a really deliberate financial commitment there saying, if you contribute to your super, we'll match it, and that's been taken up and taken on well" (Peter, AG). Ensuring that parental leave was available to whomever was nominated as the primary carer was also a practice that catered to changing gendered needs.

> So [Organization] are obviously aware that … women are really valuable in the workplace. And so, if you work for [Organization], and you're not the primary care provider, but you've got a partner that wants to go back to work, you can nominate yourself for three months as the primary care provider and lots of men which is so awesome, have actually decided to take it up.
>
> (Danielle, Trades)

Despite these successes, negotiating parental leave and then returning to work still presented barriers to women's advancement: "and coming back part-time and being able to have leadership roles that could be in a part-time capacity, would definitely be our biggest hurdle at the moment" (Carrie, AG). For example, while sport was situated within a government Organization and policies were in place to ensure a flexible workplace, the reality was somewhat different.

> I think there's still ingrained perceptions of what you can and can't do, because you're part time as probably the part time challenges. And the reason that you're part time is because you've got caring responsibilities.
>
> (Amelia, Sport)

Flexible work options need to be made available in ways that do not stigmatize or create negative consequences for women who access them (Botella et al., 2019; Galea et al., 2015; Williamson & Colley, 2018). Instead, organizations can embed policies that allow flexible work arrangements through which women can develop their capabilities to advance as leaders (O'Brien et al., 2022). However, ingrained perceptions also dominated the workplace in surgery, and women indicated they too negotiated working hours that suited men, including presenteeism and cultures of long hours (Williamson & Colley, 2018).

> And that's always something that comes up in terms of on-call rosters and things like that. So, if you're on call and get called in, if you are home alone with your child, like that doesn't happen infrequently for the females in our group … But the males, they don't have to drop the kids at school. And when they do when they say I'm leaving early to do this, it's kind of like they're congratulated for doing that, where it's expected that if you have children, and you're female, that's part of your role.
>
> (Kelly, Surgery)

Kelly's comment highlights that broader gendered expectations play a significant role in hindering how women negotiate their caring responsibilities. A key point in a continuum of care is the right to employment on an equal basis with others, hence emphasizing an agenda of equality (Nussbaum, 2003; O'Brien et al., 2022).

5.2 | Empowering potential through mentoring and networking

All three sectors attempted to implement mentoring programs as part of the intervention, with one re-emphasizing an existing program. One organization implemented a formal and comprehensive mentoring program, including a pilot, training for mentors and mentees and an evaluation. The rollout of the program during COVID-19 resulted in difficulties, as acknowledged by an Advisory Group member, "it's been hard through COVID for the last 12 months. So that (mentoring programs) would be a focus area going into next year" (Peter, AG). While COVID-19 was an unprecedented occurrence, the comment highlights the importance of persistence when trying to embed changes.

Another Organization through its member Association also launched a mentoring program that ran for 8 months. Carrie (AG) discussed how the Association and Organization worked together to implement the targeted mentoring program.

> We helped set them up with a mentor from outside of their organization … there probably wasn't the number of role models internally that they could tap into … We picked a group of mentors that were male and female, but were really disconnected from the [Organization] … they could talk openly and not feel like stuff had come back.

Formalized programs of this type are of value as they offer potential empowering opportunities (O'Brien et al., 2022). A participant from sport discussed the impact of a mentoring program that was initiated as part of the intervention: "We've had a mentoring program as part of this project. And then also connecting further with our professional body (member Association). Those have been some good opportunities" (Amelia, Sport). However, Lily (Sport) who was part of the program spoke about her discontent with being assigned a mentor, with whom she did not connect.

> I think personally, I didn't get a lot from the intervention at all. I got matched up with a mentor, who I only saw once … and it was it was a good chat, but it didn't necessarily open any doors.

Women's experiences of formal and informal mentoring programs in surgery also varied. Several women believed the formal program, which allocated mentors, was not targeted at women, and consequently did not suit their needs. These women suggested instead an informal mentoring relationship would be more valuable: "But we found that when they're allocated, they don't work. For them to work, you need to have some sort of click and develop some sort of relationship with that person" (Diane, Surgery).

Women face different challenges particularly within male-dominated industries, and mentoring programs need to be tailored to address needs of individuals or provide a choice of programs to be empowering (Beck et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2022). For instance, Danielle (Trades), suggested that having a mentor who was a mother and had navigated similar gendered organizational obstacles would be invaluable.

> I think especially in our industry, we have such a different perspective, we face a hell of a lot more challenges than men do, particularly if you're a working mum. I like the empathy. I like the compassion. And I'd like to be able to sort of look at someone that's maybe gone through similar

experiences as myself, you know, maybe it's just has juggled the kid thing, you know, and how they've navigated corporate life, being in a senior role.

Undoing gender biases in male-dominated industries is an ongoing and challenging undertaking. However, providing opportunities for women to make important relational connections allowed them to not only feel less isolated, but also empowered them to feel hope and confidence to negotiate a way forward (Allison, 2016; Braidotti, 2010; O'Brien et al., 2022). Often traditional mentoring programs are framed around masculine values, and do not accommodate the needs of women (Chesler & Chesler, 2002). Importantly participants identified that networking events opened up mentoring opportunities because they developed organically and were more empowering than perhaps formal mentoring relationships.

> But I do find that networking events are also good for mentoring because forced mentoring is very challenging because whether you are going to connect and resonate with that person is a big question. But if it happens more organically out of these networking events, I've always found that really the best way to do it.
>
> (Vicki, AG)

5.2.1 | Networking

All Organizations involved in the intervention focused on enhancing networking opportunities for women. Networking events are empowering, as they not only build a sense of hope for change, but also meaningful connections with others (O'Brien et al., 2022). Vicki (AG) spoke about the powerful effect an event had on attendees.

> One of the key wins was the introduction of the networking events. Now the networking for me, it's a huge one. From my own personal experience, becoming a female leader as well, an exec myself, I think you really need to see other women who have already achieved that, and you need to hear from them and understand their journey and understand the barriers that they faced. They can give you tips on how you can approach things and how you can overcome things and that's really powerful. It's one of the most powerful tools I've ever experienced.

Diane (Surgery) also indicated that attending networking events was empowering, it enabled her to gain an insight into how other women navigate male-dominated workplaces.

> And that was interesting in talking to people from other walks of life. It was certainly interesting and refreshing because their insights are so different from what I face on a daily basis ... I think it's actually useful, professional networking for me.

This type of reinforcement and guidance showcases positive role models and not only illustrates that success is possible but allows women to visualize their own career pathways (Opengart & Ison, 2016). Another Advisory Group member also spoke of the empowering value of networking with other women who encountered similar obstacles.

> We also ran some, I called them Q and A chats with female leaders, and they were from people outside of the sports industry. And so, it wasn't just sports scientists who attended those chats, but it allowed them to have those conversations with other female leaders in our wider industry as well so

that they could feel like they had that support, and they could openly talk about things and learn things. They're the two things that we took carriage of.

(Carrie, AG)

These connections and creating a positive environment to connect with others, affirmed and empowered women through sharing knowledge and experience, which in turn fostered hope and confidence (Allison, 2016; O'Brien et al., 2022). Sharing knowledge of the gendered constraints women face was a powerful moment that allowed them to feel less isolated. As Rachel (Surgery) commented:

You do need to know how someone else managed to balance their career with their children, or, you know, how they managed to fit in doing their exam around work and a child. You know, what drove them to do their career, how they got on, you know, interview coaching.

Feeling less isolated and discussing commonalities that women encountered daily not only highlights the persistence of gendered workplace practices, but also the need for ongoing organizational support for women to enable them to feel empowered to progress their careers (O'Brien et al., 2022, p. 447). These examples illustrate the importance of tackling problems and issues through collaboration between a member Association and Organization. As Germain et al. (2012, p. 447) notes, networking programs and initiatives need to be "grounded in an overarching strategy of diversity and inclusion." This is particularly important as informal networks that exist in male-dominated industries, such as the skilled trades, can work to exclude women (Wulff et al., 2021). It was further noted that women can acquire from others the capital necessary to advance their careers.

Based on the success of the implemented networking events, participants expressed a desire for more networking opportunities. They recognized these events offered the prospect of gaining insights into how other women succeeded.

And then there's networking opportunities … learning from the best in the business and speaking to other women in your same industry … It's something that we don't do very well. And I think they're really valuable in you know, making connections.

(Danielle, Trades)

The success of these events were recognized, however participants also noted that these empowering opportunities needed to be ongoing, embedded into organizational systems, and sustained over time (O'Brien et al., 2022). Importantly organizations need to ensure that attending events does not add to women's workload, or that they be required to make up the time spent attending such events. As Rachel (Surgery) commented

I think that there needs to be an appreciation that this networking doesn't exist so much in the workplace for women, and that we need to actively create opportunities for that. And that organizations need to set up those opportunities.

Perhaps equally important is that networking opportunities also focus on the relational element, which provides important sources of emotional and social support (Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018). As Amelia (Sport) commented "I still think there can be more done … And face-to-face … are still really important for that networking connection." Face-to-face connections were seen as a powerful way to form important networking connections, and perhaps even more importantly offered opportunities for identifying informal mentoring relationships.

However, the potential for networking to be empowering was tempered to a degree by caring responsibilities that often interfered with women's ability to attend events or programs that were designed to assist them.

> It's the timing of the events that prohibit me from go to some of these sorts of things … it's like family restrictions … you don't have time to get your own necessarily when you got kids you have to look after … So, you'll be more selective with what you can get to.
>
> (Amelia, Sport)

Organizations can assist women's networks through ensuring that opportunities and events are held at times that cater to women's "familial obligations" (Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018, p. 393). Although care must be taken to ensure that providing opportunities for women does not replicate gender norms, through positioning women as inferior and unsuited to male-dominated industries (Germain et al., 2012). We argue, networking must be supported by the organization to create events for women during work hours, or flexible work options, as often they were time poor due to caring and work responsibilities.

> Networking doesn't exist so much in the workplace for women, and that we need to actively create opportunities for that. And that organizations need to set up those opportunities.

5.3 | Cultures of belonging

Creating inclusive cultures was perhaps the most difficult focus area to address, given the persistence of unconscious bias and pervasive masculine cultures. A culture of belonging is essential for women to feel "accepted, respected, and valued" (Bridges et al., 2023, p. 273). All organizations involved in the intervention attempted to build an inclusive culture, albeit conventionally, with practices centering on ensuring recruitment strategies included diversity. As Tania (Trades) noted "When positions come up, obviously, it's basically identified, it's open to all applicants, you know, so it always has, you know, we're encouraging women, people from indigenous backgrounds, etc. So, diversity clauses are all built into those positions." Implementing tangible and accountable practices directed at creating a different set of values was central to creating cultures of belonging (O'Brien et al., 2022). For example, in trades a cultural change approach was adopted to address unconscious bias.

> So, if you see anything, there is not a culture of blame. It's a culture of wanting to improve and fix ourselves … if there was … something to be raised, it can be raised across the business at different levels without fear of retribution. So, it can be with me, it can be with our CEO. It can be with our HR team, there's this culture of, we don't blame, it's an opportunity to learn and improve.
>
> (Danielle, Trades)

Trades also conducted unconscious bias training and introduced discussions through "Toolbox" sessions. The "Toolbox" sessions were part of an ongoing program to identify where discriminatory practices were occurring and engage in a process of constantly challenging them.

> A lot of training going on in [Organization] at the minute … there's been a couple of "Toolbox" meetings on it. All of our senior leaders have had training. It's definitely something that's become really prominent in the last 12 months is behavior in the workplace.
>
> (Danielle, Trades)

Offering practices that create conditions of accountability, can potentially build inclusive cultures, and a "sense of belonging and social inclusion for women" (Bridges et al., 2023, p. 275). Trades also tackled how employees were addressed within the organization, changing the title of roles such as foreman to foreperson or supervisor. This

seemingly small change in language was a powerful way to challenge gendered assumptions of who succeeds in organizations and create more inclusive cultures (O'Brien et al., 2022). A similar change occurred in surgery, where a historical practice was changed to enable men and women to be referred as doctors instead of Mr or Ms: "One thing that we've pushed for, is that we have made it so that the set default at the college is that everyone's registration is automatically doctor" (Rachel, Surgery).

6 | DISCUSSION

Changing and challenging practices within gendered organizations to create an inclusive environment for women leaders requires a targeted organizational approach. Beck et al. (2022, p. 183), argue systemic change calls for a focus on the culture of the institute, and institutional resources are required to sustain change. Extending on the values of a continuum of care, our analysis places a stronger emphasis on capabilities and empowerment, through affirming capabilities, empowering potential and creating inclusive cultures (O'Brien et al., 2022). Through a continuum of care lens, we illustrated the strength of an Organization and its member Association working together to introduce, continually drive, reinforce and sustain changes in organizational values to build a culture for women as leaders. Rather than draw comparisons between sectors, our intention was to provide guidance for organizations in other male-dominated sectors to initiate and sustain interventions that assist women to progress as leaders. Hence, we proposed a specifically targeted intervention that focuses on three key areas through which organizations can embed accountable practices and policies. While the three Organizations had varying degrees of success in implementing targeted interventions, the successes and continuing challenges provide direction for other male-dominated sectors and highlight areas that require continued attention. We summarize each of these focus areas, to emphasize opportunities for change and identify how the values of a continuum of care can be deployed for organizations to support women in leadership positions.

6.1 | Career pathways

Similar to previous research in other male-dominated sectors (Alvinius et al., 2018; Botella et al., 2019; Bridges et al., 2022; Evans & Pfister, 2021), our analysis from the three sectors indicates that career pathways can be made visible through formalized organizational practices. Creating visible and accessible pathways, through infographics and ensuring any material relation to pathways included images of women, were several ways that organizations were assisting women to progress their careers. These practices act as values that affirm women's position within the organization and demonstrate to employees more broadly, that senior leadership positions are possible for women (O'Brien et al., 2022). The provision of information and resources, proactively driven by senior leaders, who continually reinforce, and think creatively about how pathways are made visible (e.g., infographic from trades), challenges norms of male-dominated leadership progression. Leadership programs were also invaluable, ensuring that courses challenge these norms of progression and do not position women as deficient in leadership potential. Likewise, showcasing women in leadership positions, can affirm women's position within an organization and allows them and others to "see" successful women (O'Brien et al., 2022). Organizations can showcase the stories of women who have successfully risen into leadership positions and offer insights into the steps they have taken (Bridges et al., 2023). Non-linear career pathways that do not stigmatize women (Botella et al., 2019), are required to allow women leave and re-enter at various points in their life course, accounting for parenting or other responsibilities (Bridges et al., 2022; Darvin et al., 2021). Gender equitable pathways can offer the opportunity for women to develop their capabilities and provide women with sustainable and affirming options to progress their careers (O'Brien et al., 2022).

6.2 │ Mentoring and networking

While the implementation of mentoring programs had mixed results, the successes highlighted the importance of the relational aspect of mentoring (O'Brien et al., 2022). Women emphasized that a meaningful connection with mentors had more empowering potential than working with an appointed mentor. For the empowering potential of mentoring to be realized, mentoring programs need to be tailored to address women's gendered needs (O'Brien et al., 2022). Virtual and peer mentoring were deemed the most successful in our intervention at providing support for women at various stages of their careers. Multidimensional mentoring programs (Beck et al., 2022), must be accompanied by broader, organizational support for women, such as the family leave example in career pathways, or eliminating unconscious bias, to create a workplace that empowers women and assists with their career goals (O'Brien et al., 2022). Opportunities need to be provided for women to connect with other women who have juggled corporate life and motherhood. Dashper (2019) argues that mentoring programs should allow women to re-define success to align with personal goals, rather than find ways to be successful within masculine organizations. Our intervention illustrates this goal can be supported by organizations in which women are working, to enable the empowering potential of mentoring to be realized. Providing support, via meaningful relationships to help women feel less isolated, can also be empowering, as it gives women hope that their careers can progress and bolsters their confidence to push forward (O'Brien et al., 2022). Empowering women through mentoring programs, will not only aid women's career longevity, but also assist organizations in retaining potential leaders (Bridges et al., 2023).

Meaningful relationships were also fostered through networking events that connected women with other women. This connection is critical as informal male networks can exclude women, developing social networks with other women allows them to build the capital necessary for advancement (Wulff, et al., 2021). Participants spoke about the powerful effect of networking events that allowed them to connect with women as potential mentors, and access role models who were able to share their steps taken to succeed as a leader. Role models offer "positive reinforcement and guidance" through career development, and can empower women (Opengart & Ison, 2016, p. 204). Networking opportunities were empowering and helped women feel less isolated through sharing insights into how other women navigated decisions around having children and balancing family responsibilities whilst moving into leadership roles (O'Brien et al., 2022). The empowering potential of networking was also reflected in our participant's suggestion that they would like more networking opportunities to activate the support from a group of women. Organizations can foster these types of opportunities, providing women's familial obligations are recognized when planning events (Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018). Creating opportunities for women's networks need to be formalized and included as part of an inclusive organizational culture (Bridges et al., 2023).

6.3 │ Unconscious bias and cultures of belonging

Our study demonstrated that organizations could implement practices that constantly challenge inappropriate and discriminatory behavior in the workplace. We suggest this requires all departments within an organization to be accountable for ensuring women are valued and respected. This in turn can not only affirm women's position within the organization, but also create a culture of belonging (O'Brien et al., 2022). Importantly, as noted by Bridges et al. (2023), change needs to occur across leadership to ensure that management practices are in place that support a culture of belonging, and inclusion is supported. As shown in our intervention, changes such as altering position titles so that they are not gendered, is a powerful way to signal to women that leadership positions are accessible. These types of changes alter perceptions about who succeeds in organizations.

7 | FINAL THOUGHTS: LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

We acknowledge the limitation in our research posed by the disruptive effects of COVID-19 and the gendered impact on women (Thorpe et al., 2023). Organizational changes were difficult to implement, given the way that work was rapidly changing, sometimes in unwanted ways. While some changes within the sectors were initiated and sustained, further research is required to gauge whether these changes can occur without the ongoing support of a committed Advisory Group. A longer intervention may ensure that the changes implemented could be deeply embedded into organizational practices and policies and produce enduring change. As our discussion of the persistent barriers that continue to impede women's leadership progression has shown, change requires ongoing and sustained work. A further limitation of our research is that low numbers of women in the sectors meant that our sample did not include women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

As a theoretical and practical approach to guide organizational change, a continuum of care can be deployed as both an overarching framework of values, and as a guide toward embedding multi-level practices that support women. The elements of the continuum of care, affirmation of potential, the development of capabilities, empowerment and belonging, can be continually reworked and re-framed as change occurs, or as obstacles to women's advancement arise. As we have highlighted, barriers to women's career progression persist, and these must be repeatedly challenged to ensure that organizations can more fully embrace changes in values such as those proposed through a continuum of care (O'Brien et al., 2022). Our analysis illustrated, time, persistence and continual affirmation is required to produce and sustain real change in organizational values. The support of an Advisory Group, with buy-in from industry association members, is central to this change. Our research emphasizes the continued need to address masculine values in male-dominated sectors and sustain practices that treat women as equal. As such, the feminist values in a continuum of care provides opportunities for organizations to create practices that allow women to develop their capabilities as leaders in an environment of equality. Acker's (2006) seminal work highlighted that inequality regimes within organizations continue to present challenges to achieving equality for women. However, openings or opportunities to initiate and sustain interventions continue through work such as that of feminist organizational scholars (e.g., Bridges et al., 2022; Bridges et al., 2023; Galea & Chappell, 2022). This work must continue to challenge inequality regimes, in ways that support and maintain their transformative potential.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared.

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