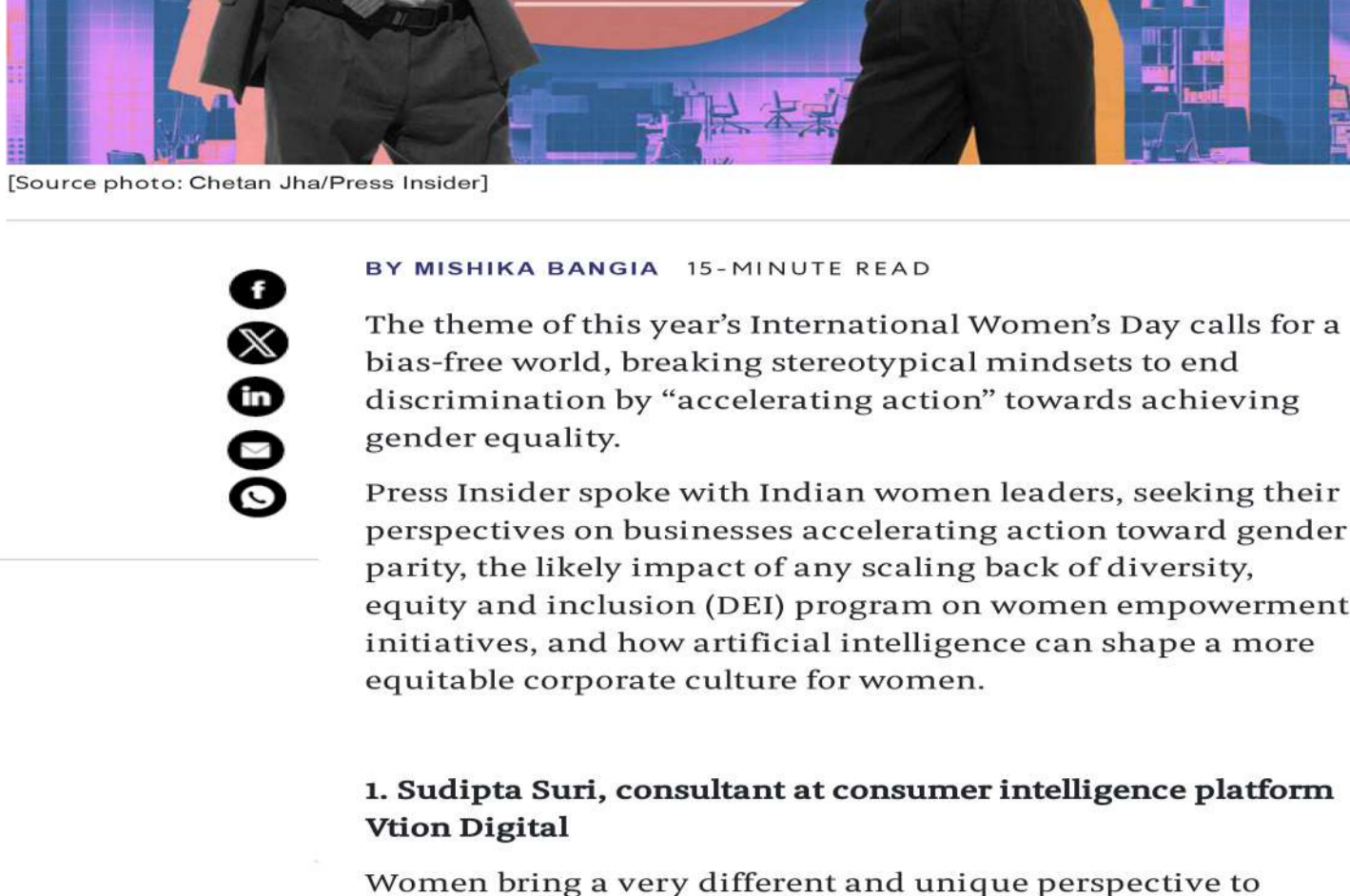


# International Women’s Day: How to break barriers and accelerate equality

Press Insider spoke with women leaders about businesses accelerating action toward gender parity and shaping a more equitable environment



[Source photo: Chetan Jha/Press Insider]

BY MISHIKA BANGIA 15-MINUTE READ

The theme of this year’s International Women’s Day calls for a bias-free world, breaking stereotypical mindsets to end discrimination by “accelerating action” towards achieving gender equality.

Press Insider spoke with Indian women leaders, seeking their perspectives on businesses accelerating action toward gender parity, the likely impact of any scaling back of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) program on women empowerment initiatives, and how artificial intelligence can shape a more equitable corporate culture for women.

Women bring a very different and unique perspective to business. They are needed in the workforce not just for diversity but for their unique perspective. Businesses need to accelerate this by having a deep understanding of their needs and having a target to keep women in the workforce by giving the right support and motivation throughout their career. Diversity training should include making both men and women understand the importance of the tasks like bringing up children. While women take up more responsibility in this aspect, men should be encouraged to do more and appreciate and celebrate women for managing multiple frontiers which also contributes to them growing as professionals.

**1. Sudipta Suri, consultant at consumer intelligence platform Vtion Digital**

Scaling back DEI initiatives is a dangerous direction that the world is heading as it will have larger ramifications. Reducing diversity will impact the quality of work in the long run. Women will, unfortunately, like other marginalized diverse population, feel the impact of this.

Artificial intelligence has the capacity to analyze large sets of data and give broad trends. AI can help analyze the impact of having a diverse population, including women, on the quality of work and decisions at work. Looking at such data across companies and industries will make decision-makers realize the importance of keeping more women in the workforce.

**2. Spardha Dhillon, chief product officer at health food scanner app Xume**

Businesses must set clear diversity targets, implement unbiased hiring and promotion policies, and create mentorship programs that actively support women in leadership roles. Additionally, fostering an inclusive workplace culture where women’s contributions are recognized and rewarded is crucial.

Scaling back DEI initiatives may slow down progress, but the global movement for gender parity remains strong. Companies that prioritize inclusivity will continue to attract top talent and perform better. Women must advocate for their rights, and businesses must uphold equitable policies regardless of political shifts.

AI can drive workplace equity by eliminating bias in hiring, offering personalized career development insights, and ensuring fair performance evaluations. However, it’s essential to audit AI models regularly to prevent reinforcing existing biases.

**3. Ankita Shekhar, global audience activation and insights Director at Boston Consulting Group**

Despite women-friendly policies, implementation remains a challenge, especially for mid-management roles where women in the 30-35 age group face hiring and promotion biases due to outdated assumptions about maternity leave. Companies must normalize equal caregiving by offering longer, paid paternity leave to eliminate this disadvantage. Women also need sponsors, not just mentors—leaders who actively advocate for their promotions. Transparent hiring and evaluation processes should remove biases that assume women are “less available” than men. Real change will come when policies challenge traditional norms rather than reinforce them.

DEI should not just be a corporate initiative but a core part of a company’s identity, unaffected by political shifts. Companies that truly value equity as a business advantage will integrate diversity into their hiring, pay structures, and leadership decisions—regardless of whether it’s labeled DEI or not. Rolling back DEI efforts risks stagnation in gender parity and weakens workplace inclusivity. Instead of performative efforts, businesses must ensure equity is measurable, embedded, and non-negotiable. A company’s real values shine through its actions, not its labels.

AI can eliminate bias in hiring by anonymizing resumes and ensuring skills-based recruitment, rather than gendered assumptions. It can conduct pay equity audits, flagging wage gaps and enabling corrective action. AI-driven sentiment analysis can identify workplace biases in employee feedback, helping HR teams proactively address microaggressions and disparities. By optimizing work distribution, AI can also prevent burnout and ensure fair workload allocation. When trained responsibly, AI has the potential to institutionalize fairness and transparency in corporate culture.

**4. Rashoo Sachdeva, founder of leadership training firm 3Dimensional Leadership**

Organizations should increase work on three pillars for enabling women to take the leap: First, creating an ecosystem and making interventions that are conducive for women not from an official but a personal standpoint, orientation of male counterparts and creating a culture based on harmony. Second, upskilling them by building core competencies, leadership skills, and mentorship, and third, consciously creating opportunities and growth paths.

The DEI initiative may have its pros and cons, but I believe it can be treated as a great opportunity to strengthen women’s position and impact based on a system of performance rather than sponsorships and accommodations. With this change, the role of systemic interventions would have to start very early in society.

AI is a tool as good as humans are able to apply it. With the increasing role of AI at work, there is now a greater possibility to leverage AI for not just creating but also assisting in job roles to meet different needs of diverse individuals, including women.

**5. Nisha Pokhriyal, assistant vice-president of brand and creative at investment platform Grip Invest**

Businesses must take bold and immediate action to accelerate gender parity in leadership. This means setting clear, measurable goals, revamping hiring and promotion practices, ensuring equal pay and transparency, and fostering flexible work policies. Companies should invest in leadership development, enforce zero tolerance for bias, and engage men as allies in driving change. By committing to these steps, businesses will create fairer, more inclusive workplaces that drive innovation, performance, and long-term success.

Businesses are nowadays focusing on AI to reduce biases in hiring and promotions, thereby ensuring that women are given equal opportunities in career advancement and recruitment. Also, in corporate culture, AI has helped automate tasks and enhance time management, offering women flexible work schedules. AI also plays a significant role in identifying and creating new career paths that are more accessible to women across sectors. This aligns with the trend of women evolving in leadership profiles and driving global progress.

**6. Shivangini J., director of marketing, communications and PR at Indian Sugar and Bio-energy Manufacturers Association (ISMA)**

As per the latest Periodic Labor Force Survey 2021-22 report, female labor force participation rate for the age group 15 years and above stood at 32.8% in India. The same number in leadership positions reduces to 18%. Taking these numbers at face value, there is still quite a gap to bridge. In my experience as a working woman, working with women and hiring and retaining both women and men in the workforce, I suggest 1) Conscious hiring where ultimately the better candidate should be hired, irrespective of the gender. However, while looking to fill up a role, the support function should consciously shortlist equal numbers of male and female candidates. I have no doubt that there is great talent in both genders and if given equal chances, there is a good possibility of female candidates landing the job.

2) The family as enabler: It all starts at the breeding ground, the home. Parents have to play a huge part in raising their children, both boy and girl, with equality. Especially make the effort to raise the boys and teach them how to respect and behave with women at home such that the same reflects at the workplace as well.

3) Safety, hygiene and women-friendly policies: Well, this is India and the safety of the women workforce is of paramount importance. Companies should have women-friendly policies; whether it is for the young girls starting the job, pregnant women, young mothers, women back to work after a sabbatical to take care of children and menopausal women. All should be encouraged and supported; these life stages do not determine their ability and expertise at work.

I don’t agree more with the actor Richard Gere calling US President Donald Trump, a bully and a thug. But then he goes on to say that it’s not just in the US, it’s everywhere. It has always been there and still we have come so far. And I strongly believe that this backlash will add more fuel to the positive movement. Because, in these winds of change, we shall find our greater direction and we shall keep rising and moving forward.

Finally, artificial intelligence is just another tool. We use it as any other resource at hand to make changes.

**7. Mahua Bisht, CEO at employee assistance platform Itoihelp**

To drive meaningful progress, businesses must adopt a multi-layered approach that targets individual behaviors, team dynamics, leadership qualities, and organizational processes to effect systemic change. This starts with setting measurable goals based on data collected from gender audits. These audits help assess current representation, pinpoint where women drop off in their career paths, and identify systemic barriers. Focus groups can provide additional insights into the invisible challenges faced by women at different levels. From these findings, companies need to set clear, board-backed targets and work with external organizations to address broader societal norms and ensure that gender parity becomes a sustained commitment rather than just an annual conversation.

Creating inclusive work cultures is another critical step. This involves fostering environments where equitable interactions are the norm, especially from male colleagues. Companies should promote sensitivity training, peer-led allyship programs, mentorship, and structured networking opportunities, which all contribute to a supportive community for women.

Support for women in leadership roles is also essential. Organizations should proactively identify and nurture high-potential female employees from the start, providing them with structured mentorship, leadership development programs, and sponsorship opportunities. It is equally important to equip these women with coaching, networking opportunities, and visibility to help them overcome the challenges of navigating largely male-dominated leadership spaces.

Despite some global organizations scaling back on DEI initiatives, in India, the trend appears different. There is a noticeable increase in demand for women’s day programs and maternity support initiatives, indicating a cultural support for policies that advance women. I don’t see those policies being scaled back—certainly not in India.

AI is increasingly playing a role in ensuring gender equity, provided it is guided responsibly by human oversight. AI tools can be used for personalization and to embed bias-free processes in recruitment, hiring, performance management, and wellbeing support. Often, the best approach combines AI with human interventions. For instance, our counseling interventions continue to rely on one-on-one interactions with professional counselors trained for individualized support, specifically contextualized for India.

**8. Cleona Britto D’Souza, CEO at Growth Cove LLP**

Gender parity in leadership is essential for business, not merely a diversity target. Companies should enforce equitable hiring and promotions with transparent, unbiased policies to guarantee fair leadership representation. They must cultivate inclusive work environments through bias training, flexible work arrangements, and DEI-focused leadership accountability. Additionally, setting and measuring KPIs that link gender parity to leadership performance is crucial for tracking progress. Companies should also support CSR initiatives that fund women-owned businesses and train female entrepreneurs. Embedding inclusivity into corporate culture enhances innovation, profitability, and sustainable success.

AI is transformative in eliminating bias, ensuring fair pay, and promoting inclusivity. Businesses can utilize AI to enable bias-free hiring and promotions, with tools that assess talent based on skills rather than demographics. AI analytics can also detect pay disparities and remove biases in performance evaluations. Additionally, AI can personalize leadership development by mapping career growth paths and linking women to pertinent opportunities. AI-driven insights help shape gender-inclusive workplace policies and enhance employee well-being. When combined with committed leadership, AI acts as a powerful tool for achieving a truly equitable and inclusive corporate environment.

**9. Dr. Malini Saba, philanthropist and founder of Anannke Foundation**

The journey to gender parity in leadership doesn’t have to be a constant struggle or a repetitive plea for change. Instead, let’s focus on creating opportunities that are genuine, where women are seen not as a checkbox to be ticked but as capable leaders ready to shine. It’s time to lead by example, where organisations step up to provide real opportunities for women to showcase their talent and skill, with a focus on merit, not gender. The road to parity is paved with empowerment, and businesses can accelerate action by fostering environments that allow women to lead with confidence, innovation, and excellence. It’s not about asking for a place at the table—it’s about building the table where everyone has an equal seat.

It’s important to approach this challenge with optimism and a forward-thinking mindset. Women have never sought handouts; we’re driven by talent, determination, and the desire to succeed on our own merit. While it’s true that DEI initiatives may face challenges, the key is not to back down but to refocus on what truly matters: equality. We want to be recognized for who we are and what we bring to the table, not for the gender we were born with. The goal should be simple: equality as a human right. Let’s keep pushing for progress, not out of entitlement, but out of our inherent right to thrive, succeed, and contribute.

AI is a powerful tool that can help create a more equitable workplace by minimizing bias and supporting objective decision-making. However, we should not allow ourselves to be defined by the need for a “bailout.” Why should we always expect something external to fix what’s fundamentally a human issue? AI is here to assist, not to lead the charge. We are humans, with incredible potential, and it’s our leadership, ambition, and capability that should drive change. When used responsibly, AI can help ensure fairness, whether in recruitment, promotions, or pay, but it’s only one part of the equation. The real change comes from within—our values, actions, and commitment to creating a culture of true equality and respect. Let’s use AI as a tool to amplify our strengths, not as a crutch.

**10. Jyotsna Dash Nanda, assistant vice-president for corporate communications at DS Group**

Businesses can take critical steps to promote gender parity in leadership: Implement flexible work policies with hours and parental leave supporting work-life balance, enabling women’s career advancement. Address unconscious bias by training leaders to recognize and mitigate biases and using blind resume screening for fair hiring. Promote mentorship and sponsorship through programs connecting women with senior leaders for career growth. Ensure pay equity by conducting pay audits and standardizing salary bands to eliminate disparities. Set measurable DEI goals linked to performance reviews to hold leaders accountable.

The trend of major US firms scaling back DEI initiatives, especially after Donald Trump’s return to the White House, highlights the potential risks to women in the workplace. DEI programs provide essential support networks, mentorship, and bias mitigation, empowering women to overcome career hurdles. Without these initiatives, women may face weaker support systems, fewer advancement opportunities, and greater bias in hiring and promotions. This pullback could indicate a cultural shift away from diversity and inclusion, potentially creating a less inclusive environment for women and other marginalized groups. Yet, firms like Apple and Costco show that commitment to DEI can continue despite broader trends. Indian companies, given their unique societal context, might maintain or even strengthen their DEI efforts to empower marginalized groups.

AI can play a significant role in creating a fairer corporate culture for women by minimizing hiring biases through algorithms focused on skills over demographics, enhancing employment opportunities. For instance, companies like Unilever have increased diversity by 16% using AI hiring tools. AI can also promote gender equality in leadership by addressing implicit biases in job descriptions and performance evaluations, and designing inclusive training programs. Additionally, AI can enhance access to education and skills development, tailoring learning to evolving job markets. However, it’s vital that AI systems are trained on diverse data sets to prevent perpetuating biases. By responsibly leveraging AI, companies can foster women’s inclusion and address structural inequities, leading to a more inclusive corporate environment.

**11. Vibha Singal, CEO at Sukoon Unlimited**

To truly advance gender parity, businesses must shift from symbolic commitments to systemic change. This involves redesigning leadership pipelines to mentor and sponsor women for top roles, setting clear, measurable goals for gender representation at all levels, and eliminating unconscious bias in promotions and evaluations with structured, bias-free frameworks. Enhancing workplace flexibility to support work-life integration and tying executive incentives to DEI progress are crucial to maintaining leadership commitment. Gender parity not only ensures fairness but also drives innovation, profitability, and organizational resilience.

Scaling back DEI initiatives now could undo years of progress, leaving women, particularly those of color and in underrepresented sectors, more exposed to biases and barriers. Despite potential political pressures, the rationale for diversity is compelling—companies with diverse leadership consistently outperform their peers. Firms committed to long-term success must uphold their gender equity commitments, integrating inclusion into their core strategies to ensure diverse hiring, equal pay, and unbiased promotions are standard practice. Now, more than ever, it’s critical for companies to stay the course.

Ethically applied, AI can transform workplace equity by anonymizing resumes, standardizing candidate evaluations, enabling fair performance reviews with objective data, improving workplace flexibility through predictive analytics, ensuring pay equity by analyzing salary trends, and enhancing mentorship and career growth by aligning women with suitable learning and leadership opportunities. However, AI’s effectiveness depends on the diversity of the data it’s trained on. Companies must carefully design and monitor their AI tools to avoid perpetuating biases. Used responsibly, AI can significantly contribute to a more inclusive and equitable corporate environment.

**12. Charu Pahuja, director and COO at Wise Finserv Private Wealth**

This International Women’s Day, brands need to move beyond symbolic allyship and take concrete actions to close the gender gap in leadership. The theme this year emphasizes enduring, creative, and measurable actions.

Women’s advancement into corporate leadership is now at risk as major companies like Meta and Alphabet reduce their DEI efforts due to a shifting political climate. It’s crucial to differentiate between a conservative backlash and the loss of hard-earned gains. Diversity is not merely a political stance but a core economic strategy—diverse leadership consistently yields better outcomes.

Rather than avoid challenges, companies should integrate gender equality into their business goals. This involves increasing the number of women in senior positions, ensuring equal pay, and actively shaping organizational cultures to support gender diversity.

**13. Kavita Nautiyal, head of accounts payable services at Ericsson**

Gender equality isn’t just about hiring more women—it’s about building a workplace where women have the support, opportunities, and confidence to grow, lead, and succeed. Ensuring equal pay for equal work, investing in leadership development, and supporting work-life balance could surely help achieve gender parity in leadership positions.

Scaling back DEI initiatives could stall progress and widen the gap for women and marginalized communities. Companies with diverse leadership consistently outperform those without—because diversity drives innovation and better decision-making. Now, more than ever, companies must resist political pressure and stay committed to inclusion. Progress may slow, but it doesn’t have to stop.

AI is a tool. It can either reinforce bias or drive fairness. It alone won’t fix inequality, but if designed and used intentionally, it can be a powerful force for change. AI-driven recruitment tools can help remove unconscious bias in screening and selection. AI also can analyze salary data to identify and correct wage gaps, while also tracking promotion trends, leadership representation, and performance feedback to ensure fair opportunities.