



Expert Paper

WOMEN IN LOGISTICS

Insights & inspiration
on how executive leadership can
drive male-female balance.

INTRODUCTION

The logistics sector has traditionally been dominated by men, both in operational and managerial roles. Despite the growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion (DEI) in the broader business world, this male-female imbalance persists, even in 2025. However, logistics -like other industries- stands to benefit significantly from achieving a better male-female balance. Numerous studies suggest that diverse teams outperform in areas such as talent recruitment, job retention, innovation, creativity, and even revenue growth. Moreover, for the logistics sector specifically, improved male-female balance could play a key role in addressing the chronic shortage of drivers and operators. In this context, **DEI is not the ultimate goal but rather the starting point for a forward-thinking company - driven by leadership.** Leadership shapes not only a company's strategic direction but also its organisational culture. Management, therefore, has a critical role to play in driving the transition toward a better male/female balance.



Achieving a good male-female balance is more important than strict parity. Research shows that even a 30/70 male-female balance can have a significant positive impact. By mixing skills within teams, we can achieve the best results, which indirectly means having a good male-female mix. This balanced approach not only enhances team performance but also fosters innovation, sustainability, compliance, and resilience in the logistics industry.

Bob Van Steenweghen
H.Essers

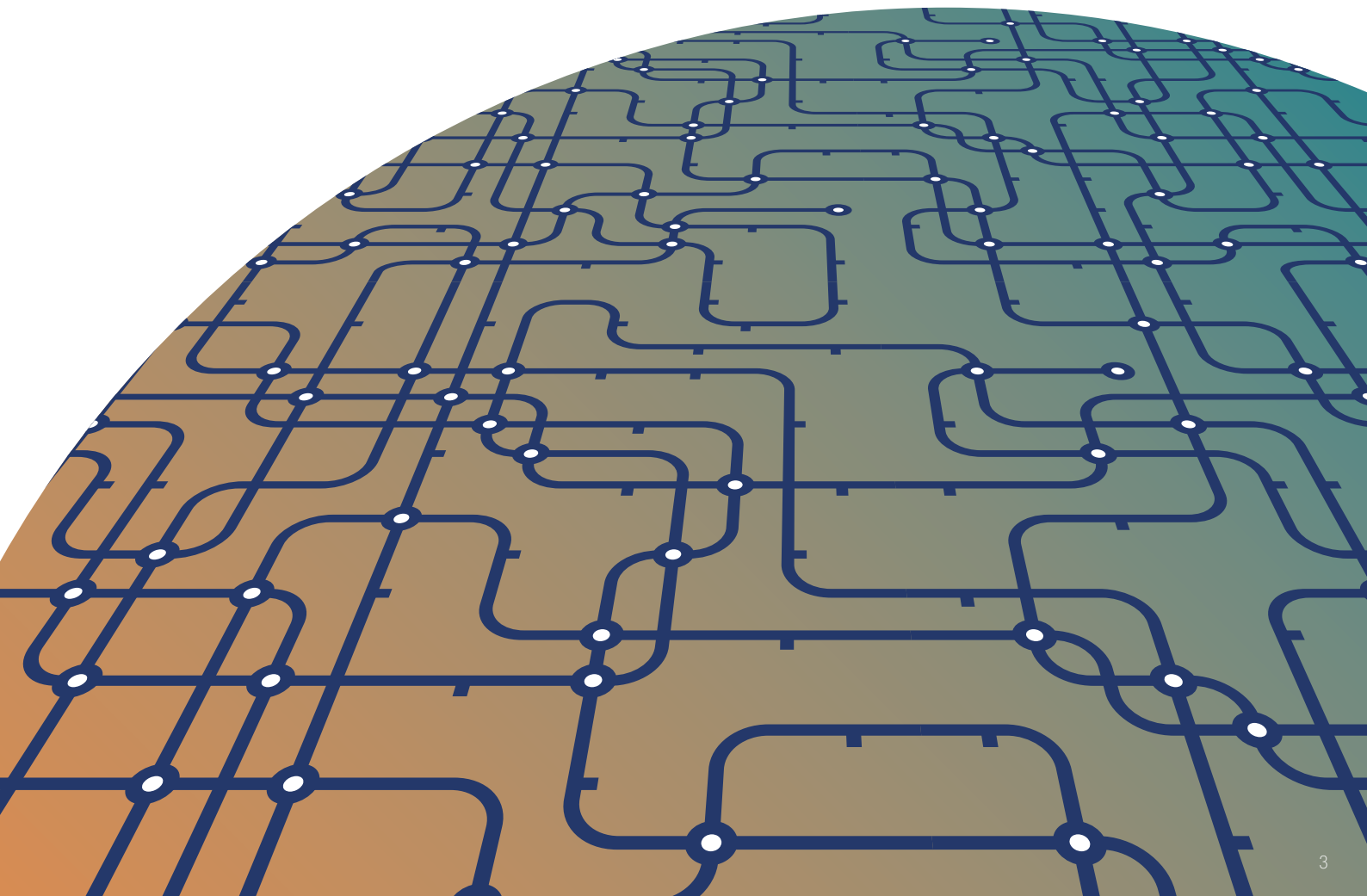
131 years or more

The benefits of male-female balance are undeniable, yet, meaningful change remains elusive. For example, the World Economic Forum estimates that achieving male/female parity across all sectors could take as long as 131 years. In traditionally male-dominated industries like logistics, this timeline could be even longer. The pressing question, then, is: **how can we accelerate this transition?**

Women in Logistics: a joint effort

This is precisely why H.Essers and Dow initiated the industry-wide consortium **Women in Logistics** (WIL). While members are already implementing numerous efforts within their own organisations, by working together, we aim to drive sustainable, sector-wide change.

Our mission? **To bridge the male-female gap in Europe's logistics sector and foster an inclusive working environment.** In doing so, we aim to make the sector more appealing, balanced, and innovative. Our efforts centre on the chemical sector, operating from four key pillars: top-down, bottom-up, inside-out, and outside-in.





Top-down

Real change is only achievable when it is deeply embedded in a company's culture and strategy. That's why it is essential for **top management to take the lead in driving the transition toward better male-female balance**. This means actively promoting male/female equality and also serving as role models and ambassadors throughout the process. In doing so, **DEI will become ingrained in the foundation of the company**, inspiring and even transforming the entire organisation.



Bottom-up

A solid foundation at every level of the organisation is essential. With support from top management, **transformation happens across the organisation**, with **initiatives and best practices emerging from the ground up**. Engaging lower management, such as team leaders, is essential for building grassroots support and aligning daily operations.



Inside-out

Sharing success stories from other members fosters collaboration and innovation within our EU logistics community, inspiring tailored strategies. We believe in co-competition: collaboration beyond competition.



Outside-in

By leveraging our collective influence, **we advocate for legislative support and other impactful measures to promote male/female parity beyond our organisation**. This proactive stance reinforces our commitment to societal change.

Through working groups, panel discussions, and strategic projects, we, as a consortium, strive to enhance male/female diversity. Our insights and experiences are not confined within our walls; instead, we share them under the principle of co-competition, a unique concept in this sector. An excellent example is this inspiration guide, designed to reach as many like-minded individuals in the sector as possible to maximise impact.

In this edition, we focus on the first pillar: top-down. The contents for this guide were inspired by a panel discussion and keynote hosted by founding WIL member H.Essers. For this event, the consortium invited numerous industry executives to collectively reflect on the critical role of strategic leadership as a driver of (male/female) equality.

In this white paper, we explain the role of executive leadership in driving Diversity & Inclusion by embedding it into the core of their organisations. A true diversity strategy starts at the top, with leadership setting clear priorities, establishing a purpose-driven culture, and fostering role models who embody these values. By prioritising male/female balance at the highest levels, executives lay the foundation for meaningful, sustainable change throughout the organisation.

PURPOSE

Meaningful change starts at the top, with leadership defining a clear and compelling 'why.' **Executive management plays a crucial role in setting the tone for an inclusive corporate culture by articulating the deeper motivations and strategic drivers behind DEI.** Leaders who are intrinsically motivated - who truly believe in the value of diversity and its role in business success - have a far greater impact on **driving sustainable change.** While this motivation may require continuous nurturing through education, exposure to diverse perspectives, and open dialogue, doing so strengthens their influence, making their initiatives more impactful and their commitment more enduring. **The top-down approach ensures that diversity is not just a set of initiatives but a fundamental part of the organisation's vision and long-term success.** By focusing on the 'why' rather than merely the 'what,' leadership can anchor male-female balance in intrinsic motivation, making it a genuine and sustainable priority. This clarity of purpose not only **strengthens commitment at all levels** but also **enhances the organisation's ability to navigate challenges along the way.**

The fairness case: from numbers to fairness

Executive leadership often seeks figures and data to prove that inclusiveness benefits their business. Indeed, numerous studies and reports demonstrate a strong correlation between male/female diversity and performance. While this data is widely available and scientifically validated, it **may not be enough to inspire lasting change.** Organisations must shift from focusing solely on the business case for DEI to embracing the fairness case, **treating DEI as a fundamental principle of equality and fairness.** This approach fosters **genuine engagement** and delivers **strategic benefits** not just to the company but to society as a whole. Executive leadership and its managers play a pivotal role in driving this evolution. Through their roles and the policies they help shape, they are ideally positioned to act as ambassadors for embedding inclusion in every level of the workplace. Does your organisation already look beyond numbers and statistics when addressing DEI? How do you approach this as a leader?

What is your personal motivation?

Executive leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the motivation behind **Diversity, Equity & Inclusion**. The inspiration session that forms the basis of this paper brought together WIL members and industry leaders to reflect on their personal and professional drivers for fostering inclusivity. Their insights reveal that while leadership commitment to male-female balance may be visible in policies and statements, its true depth is felt through personal experiences and a strong sense of responsibility.

One executive, for example, shared how witnessing male-female disparities in the industry motivated them to actively create a more inclusive environment. Others, shaped by their upbringing and a belief in equal opportunities, see it as their duty to ensure that principle is reflected in the workplace. For some, parenthood has been a powerful driver – realizing the challenges their own children [or daughters?] may face in the male-dominated logistics sector has strengthened their resolve to build a workplace where future generations, regardless of male/female, have equal opportunities to thrive. Some female leaders, having had to prove themselves more than their male counterparts, feel a strong commitment to paving an easier path for the next generation. Meanwhile, other executives emphasized the importance of using their influence to support underrepresented groups in unlocking their full potential.

The motivations may differ, but one thing is clear: **we can and must do better**. At WIL, we believe this shared conviction provides the momentum to drive real change. By channeling this commitment into action, we move boldly toward a more fair and inclusive future.

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Inclusion is more than a nice logo, hollow slogans, or flashy statistics on a website. I genuinely want to help make a difference in the chemical industry.



The paradox of meritocracy

Research shows that the **risk of male/female bias** -whether conscious or unconscious- is **often higher in companies that pride themselves on being meritocracies**, where employees are rewarded based solely on effort, performance, and talent, regardless of origin or background. The assumption that decisions are made purely on objective data can lead to less scrutiny of existing biases. As a result, these companies may (unconsciously) perpetuate male/female bias, sometimes in subtle and insidious ways. To counter this, specific **training**, diversity **metrics**, and **objectively designed assessment criteria** can be **valuable tools**. Maintaining constant **awareness of the impact of prejudice** is equally important. Moreover, **embedding DEI into the corporate culture** -rather than treating it as the sole responsibility of the HR department- **can further reduce the risk of bias**. How do you experience this as a manager in your organisation? And how have you encountered this over the course of your career?

Step away from the individual perspective

Diversity is often framed as benefiting specific underrepresented groups, such as women. However, it's time to shift away from this individualistic perspective. **An inclusive work environment not only empowers individuals but also enhances organisational performance and the collective well-being of employees**. It fosters higher employee engagement and motivation, strengthens company culture by ensuring everyone feels valued, and reduces staff turnover.

Inclusive workplaces, lasting impact

How inclusive is your organisation's physical workplace? At first glance, you might not see major issues in the office: separate restrooms and changing rooms, well-equipped desks, and perhaps even a designated space for nursing mothers. But what about your warehouses and distribution centres? These environments were often historically designed for predominantly male teams. This raises a chicken-and-egg question: are insufficient investments made in facilities because so few women apply for roles as operators and drivers, or does the lack of proper infrastructure discourage women from pursuing these roles in the first place? **Creating an inclusive working environment requires intentional investment in infrastructure, safety, and comfort**. From adequate sanitary facilities to male/female-appropriate safety shoes. From ergonomic equipment to appropriate physical tasks. These investments not only make everyone feel welcome in your organisation but also yield long-term benefits for retention, satisfaction, and performance.

CULTURE

An **inclusive corporate culture** is not the work of a few, nor is it one of those corporate challenges you can tackle in a few meetings. It **requires time a lot of time and the ongoing commitment and attention of everyone in your organisation**, starting at the top. Only then can awareness and behavioural change grow into rock-solid foundations for an organisation where diversity is not the exception but the rule. Start by sprinting toward like-minded people but be prepared for a marathon.

Where does your company stand today?

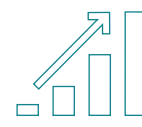
Research identifies different stages an organisation can go through in terms of DEI: the **compliant phase**, the **responsive phase**, and the **strategic phase**. While most organisations claim to have moved beyond the first phase, where efforts are made solely to meet legally imposed quotas, few report having reached the final strategic phase.



1
compliant phase



2
responsive phase



3
strategic phase

Reaching the **strategic phase** requires a **fundamental shift in how organisations approach DEI**. It requires embedding inclusivity into leadership decisions, operational strategies, and corporate values. This phase fosters an environment where **inclusion is not an initiative but a defining characteristic of the workplace culture**.

Transitioning from one phase to the next is not always a linear process, and progress often requires **reassessment** and **recalibration**. Organisations may find themselves fluctuating between responsive and strategic, as priorities shift and challenges emerge. The key is **continuous commitment** - ensuring that DEI remains at the forefront of decision-making, with **clear leadership buy-in** and **measurable impact**.

What stage is your organisation in, and what steps can be taken to move forward?

Most companies identify with the **responsive phase**: efforts are underway and the importance of DEI is acknowledged, but genuine, substantive change remains elusive due to an overemphasis on numbers and HR-driven initiatives. What stage is your organisation in?

From sticky floor to glass ceiling and the cliff



Glass ceiling

The **glass ceiling** is a well-known metaphor for **the invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching top leadership positions**. However, the greatest challenge for women often starts much earlier. Many are already stuck at lower levels, unable to take the first step toward a managerial position - a phenomenon known as the sticky floor. Key causes include stereotyping, lack of support, work-life balance challenges, and limited development opportunities. Addressing the sticky floor structurally is crucial to promoting male-female equality at higher levels. Without this foundation, women remain 'stuck' at lower levels within the organisation. Investments in women's leadership programmes, mentoring, and **a corporate culture where advancement is based on performance** and skills (true meritocracy) are essential for progress.



Broken rung

There is no shortage of metaphors in the complex maze that is DEI. From the glass ceiling and sticky floor we move to the **glass cliff and broken rung** - two more significant obstacles that women (and other underrepresented groups) may face in their careers. The **broken rung** refers to **the first critical barrier women encounter on their career ladder toward a managerial position**, once they have overcome the sticky floor. A lack of promotion opportunities, limited networking access, and insufficient training often discourage women from advancing further up the ladder.



Glass cliff

The **glass cliff**, on the other hand, describes **situations where women are promoted to leadership roles primarily during crises or other challenging times** - when the likelihood of success is already slim. The consequence? When women in glass-cliff situations fail to steer their teams or organisations away from disaster, their reputation suffers. This failure often fuels the unfair perception that women are unsuited for such positions. **Breaking through these barriers requires more than metaphors - it demands actionable strategies, structural investments, and a corporate culture that fosters equality and opportunities for everyone.**

ROLE MODEL

Do you feel that DEI is still too often seen as a box-ticking exercise within your company? That the term is sometimes thrown around simply because it is expected in today's business climate? We hope you can answer both questions with a firm no, but we are here to help you on your journey to becoming a role model within your organisation. **As a role model, you help set the tone - not out of obligation, but from genuine conviction.** But what does it actually mean to be a role model?

Practice what you preach

While executives play a vital role in fostering an inclusive workplace, their influence is limited if DEI is perceived as mere window-dressing. To truly gain support within your organisation and embed (male/female) equality into the corporate culture, you need to genuinely believe in the benefits of diversity and equality. Radically changing your corporate culture or randomly adjusting job postings to attract more women and boost the numbers is not the best idea. **Start at the beginning:** why is an inclusive corporate culture so important for your company? How does this vision align with your company's mission and values? How does the theme resonate with your own standards, beliefs, and purpose? **Talking about DEI is not enough.** If you don't truly believe in it or stand behind it, you'll quickly lose credibility.

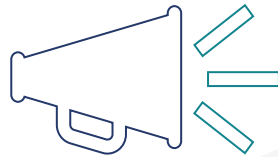
What role do you play?

You don't have to be a direct manager to play an active role in DEI. There are **many ways to get involved**:



Be a sponsor

Use your network to support someone from an underrepresented group.



Be an amplifier

Ensure the **voices of underrepresented groups are heard and acknowledged**, for example, during meetings.



Be an advocate

Use your position and experience to help others advance and stand up for their opportunities.



Be a student

Learn about the challenges faced by underrepresented groups and remain critical of your own biases.



Be a coach

Keep your door open: with your listening ear and experience, **support team members and encourage others** to prioritise an inclusive workplace.

You don't have to choose just one role; by embracing all five, you can make a meaningful impact on your organisation and its environment.

A CALL TO ACTION

The road to a male-female balanced logistics sector requires more than individual or stand-alone initiatives. It is a **strategic choice** - a vision that must be embraced at the highest level. Leadership plays a pivotal role in this process, not only to provide direction but also to ensure and accelerate lasting change. By actively engaging in inclusion and diversity, managers send the right message: that **male/female equality is a fundamental value**, not an optional ambition. In doing so, they are not only cultivating an inclusive corporate culture but also **creating an industry where the talents of everyone, regardless of male/female, are fully recognised and valued.**

With the Women in Logistics (WIL) consortium, we aim to **inspire and support organisations and their leadership in achieving this vision.** By sharing our expertise and network, we help businesses structurally embed male-female equality into their operations. **WIL serves as a platform for exchanging experiences and sharing best practices - leading the logistics sector, step by step, into an inclusive future.**



The content of this white paper is based on insights from a panel discussion and roundtable hosted by founding WIL member H.Essers. Executives from companies in the chemical and healthcare sectors participated in the inspiration session. The keynote speaker of the day was Michèle Mees, a renowned authority on diversity and inclusion.

ABOUT THE WIL CONSORTIUM

Women in Logistics: collaboration for change

Women in Logistics is an industry-wide initiative founded by **Dow** and **H.Essers**, **in collaboration with the European Chemical Transport Association (ECTA)** and the **European Chemical Industry Council (Cefic)**. Inspired by Dow's rollout of its Supplier Diversity Strategy and H.Essers' diversity goals as a certified female-owned company, the two organisations decided to reach out to the entire industry with the **aim of reaching male-female balance and promoting an inclusive environment**. We received immediate support and engagement from ECTA and Cefic. Together with our members, we **aim to champion diversity in the industry and to accelerate the closing of the male/female gap in European chemical logistics**. Women in Logistics strives to create **a more attractive, equitable, and innovative logistics sector**.

Towards a male-female balance

Based on data-driven top-down awareness, **WIL wants to be an inspiring platform for company action plans**. The consortium aims to drive commitment to optimise conditions that promote diversity while creating an inclusive and thriving logistics ecosystem.

Our dedication to diversity and inclusion aims to **create a work environment where all employees feel valued and can thrive**. By focusing on these principles, we believe a diverse logistics sector is better in many respects and will attract more diverse talent. These two forces will reinforce each other, ultimately driving success and growth.

Embark on this journey

As we embark on this journey, we **invite industry stakeholders to join our efforts**. By **focusing on leadership, drivers, and operators**, the initiative aims to foster **meaningful change and create a more diverse and inclusive industry landscape**. Through collaborative efforts and ongoing engagement, Women in Logistics is committed to **advancing male/female equity and empowering women** across all levels of the logistics sector.

WOMEN IN LOGISTICS



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Source:
The Five Stages of DEI Maturity
- Ella F. Washington