

Closing the Gap: Strategies for Advancing Gender Equity in the Workplace

Christine D. Bataille
Ithaca College

Rachel Ng
Ithaca College

Margaret B. Shackell
Ithaca College

This study examines U.S.-based organizations advancing gender equity (GE) in the workplace amid shifting political and societal attitudes toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Using Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) with 80 HR leaders, we identify practices that are helping to advance GE. Regression analysis shows mentoring programs significantly correlate with equitable pay and reduced gender pay gaps. Qualitative findings highlight three mentoring outcomes - leadership skill development, network building, and goal setting with feedback - as key drivers of increased gender equity. Results inform best practices for closing the gender gap in U.S. organizations.

Keywords: gender equity, best practices, mentoring, leadership skill development, network building, goal setting

INTRODUCTION

On January 20, 2025, Donald Trump stated in an executive order, “The Biden Administration forced illegal and immoral discrimination programs, going by the name ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion’ (DEI), into virtually all aspects of the Federal Government, in areas ranging from airline safety to the military...That ends today...[we will] terminate, to the maximum extent allowed by law, all DEI, DEIA, and “environmental justice” offices and positions...” (White House, 2025).

This powerful language addresses the significant divide the U.S. is currently facing regarding DEI initiatives. Although Donald Trump’s executive order points to the Biden Administration as responsible for the proliferation of DEI initiatives, the birth of DEI is usually traced back to the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin illegal in employment (Kratz, 2024). Over the past several decades, DEI has gained traction in the American government, business, and nonprofit sectors. The growth includes increasing policies and practices aimed at eliminating discrimination in all its forms; for example, the 1980s saw the widening of DEI initiatives to include a broader swath of identity groups, including ethnic, religious, and LGBTQ+ communities (Kratz,

2024). Not long after, workplaces began to make their DEI programs more formalized, creating positions such as Chief Diversity Officer or Vice President of Diversity and offering training programs to increase employee awareness of diversity issues and best practices for creating inclusive working environments (Kratz, 2024). These initiatives demonstrate that organizations have recognized the need for their workforce to reflect the diversity of the labor market and customer base in order to remain competitive. In the 2010s, the #MeToo movement brought gender to the forefront of DEI concerns and companies began to place more emphasis on gender equity, such as supporting women's advancement in organizations and developing male allies (Kratz, 2024). This trend continued into the 2020s, when DEI practices were prevalent across industries and sectors, yet a divide began to emerge. Whereas many Americans believed in fostering inclusive environments and making everyone feel valued and able to contribute, a backlash was growing (Kratz, 2024). The attacks on DEI came to the forefront in 2023 when the Supreme Court banned affirmative action in college admissions and many businesses responded by ending or significantly reducing their DEI efforts (PBS NewsHour, 2025).

With the election of Donald Trump, many businesses increased their scrutiny of DEI programs. While some businesses, such as Target, are scaling back their DEI efforts, other large companies, including Costco and Delta Air Lines, are strengthening their commitments (PBS NewsHour, 2025). In which direction the majority of U.S. employers go with respect to DEI efforts remains to be seen. However, polling suggests that Americans believe in equity and see diversity as central to who we are as a nation (PBS NewsHour, 2025). The current political environment leaves many uncertain about the future, but some remain hopeful; for example, Forbes contributor, Julie Kratz (2024), predicts: "While I do not have a magic wand or crystal ball, having spent 10 years in the DEI industry, I believe DEI will survive the backlash, political polarization and legal challenges, even the [Trump] presidency."

The future is unclear, but the challenges we face now are the result of decades of slow progress. The U.S. lags behind most developed countries in terms of gender equity, a key aspect of DEI. Gender equity (GE) refers to "The process of ensuring fairness through measures that dismantle the historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from operating on a level playing field" (UNESCO, 2003). The concept of gender equity acknowledges that women require distinct support systems and resources to address historical disadvantages, with the ultimate aim of achieving a society where everyone, regardless of gender, enjoys equal rights and access to opportunities. The 2024 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report ranks countries based on four factors: educational attainment, economic participation and opportunity, health and survival, and political empowerment. Iceland ranks first with 90% parity. The United States ranks 43rd at 75% (World Economic Forum, 2024). This represents a drop from the 27th spot in 2022, when the U.S. had a gender parity of 77%; the gender gap is widening in the U.S. (World Economic Forum, 2022).

Despite both the lack of and decline in GE in the United States, there are some exemplary US-based businesses that have been recognized for making significant strides in advancing GE. For example, Microsoft has been tracking and reporting the demographics of its global workforce for over a decade and since 2018, the software giant has increased the representation of women in all levels of the organization (Milanesi, 2023). L'Oreal USA supports women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) through fellowships and mentoring opportunities (youngwomenaspire.com, 2025).

In the study presented herein, we sought to learn from leading organizations regarding best practices used to reduce gender inequity. Accordingly, we pose three research questions. First, how are exemplary US-based organizations advancing GE in the US workplace? Second, what exemplary GE policies and practices are being used in US-based organizations? Third, which GE policies and practices are having a real impact on closing the gender gap?

In the remainder of the paper, we review the literature related to gender equity practices, describe our method, report our findings, and discuss the implications of our research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite a generalized decrease in the distinction of gender roles as women's workforce participation increases and men take more active roles in caring for home and family (Gerson, 2010), advances in gender equity in the US workplace are stagnate and even regressing (Du, 2024). Gender schema theory (Bem, 1983) and social role theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) help explain that attributing preferences, skills, personality attributes, and behaviors based on gender is a learned behavior influenced by societal norms. In other words, children are socialized to believe that certain behaviors are appropriate for one biological sex versus the other. Historically, men have occupied "breadwinner and higher status roles" while women have occupied "homemaker and lower status roles" (Eagly & Karau, 2002: 574). In a vivid example of how gender inequity continues to permeate our society, NFL kicker, Harrison Butker, referred to female graduates in his 2024 commencement address at Benedictine College as having had "the most diabolic lies told" to them about their potential in the workplace and suggested that a woman's life begins when she becomes a wife and mother (Triesman, 2024).

Fortunately, several factors have been identified by scholars and practitioners alike that help combat gender inequity and contribute to women's advancement in organizations. For example, positive women-to-women working relationships and both formal and informal mentoring have been shown to positively impact women's career advancement (O'Neil, Brooks & Hopkins, 2018). Additionally, participation in leadership/executive development programs, mentorship/sponsorship from senior leaders and networking opportunities have been shown to increase women's career development and advancement (Yu, 2020; Lewis et al., 2018). In particular, mentoring, and its sister practice, sponsorship, have been shown to help women advance in organizations thus leading to an increase in GE (Anderson, 2005; Burke, 2017; Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). A mentor is traditionally defined as a senior or more experienced person working with a protégé, or mentee, to provide support and guidance (Kram, 1985). Kram explains that mentors can provide two levels of support for mentees: (1) career development and (2) personal growth. Career-related support encompasses advancements in compensation, skills development, promotions, sponsorship, networking, coaching, visibility, and protection. Mentors actively expose their protégés to influential networks, nominate them for assignments, provide coaching and feedback on tasks, and protect them from backlash and failure. Personal development entails providing a sense of social acceptance and belonging through role modeling, counseling, and comradery. Mentors also work on building confidence to help mentees speak up, feel heard, and gain clarity about their goals (de Vries, 2016). Both male and female mentors have been shown to have a positive impact on their female mentees (Olsen & LaGree, 2023). Mentees who received both types of support also reported feeling more valued and supported by their organization (Baranik et al., 2010). Career supports were more directly associated with improving task-related work that benefitted career advancement (Allen et al., 2004). Traditional mentoring programs have historically been more accessible to men than women, contributing to gender disparities in career advancement opportunities (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). Therefore, having a formal mentoring policy helps ensure equal access to mentorship, thus reducing gender inequalities (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021, House et al., 2021). Enforcing the policy with clear goals and a structured approach breaks down these barriers, creating equitable and consistent opportunities.

Leadership Development

Mentoring that includes leadership development is crucial to addressing gender equity and increasing representation for women. Traditional leadership programs focus on developing both hard and soft skills, as well as understanding semantics. However, gender equity-focused leadership programs have placed greater attention on areas such as finance, construction, athletics, and negotiation, from which women have traditionally been excluded (Thomas & Hughes, 2025). When mentorship is executed with a gender lens, it can help create positive change in the workplace by supporting new leaders who are ready to promote diversity and question unfair gender expectations (Carter et al., 2020). GE focused leadership both builds essential skills and confronts the challenges of existing workplace culture and norms. Mentoring programs tailored to women help dismantle gender-related barriers and redefine traditional models of leadership and

success that have favored a male ideal (Dashper, 2020). Women who have achieved a series of promotions often credit their success to mentoring (Meyers, 2015).

Mentorship not only benefits the mentee but can also educate the mentor. Mentors reported broadening their networks, improving relationships with colleagues, gaining a deeper understanding of team needs, enhancing management skills, and increasing their altruism (de Vries, 2016). Male mentors also noted that they gained greater awareness of the challenges women face in the workplace, leading to a deeper understanding of gender disparities and more informed support for equity efforts (de Vries, 2016).

Mentoring vs. Sponsorship

A more impactful and engaged form of mentoring is sponsorship, where leaders actively advocate for their mentees' advancement. Sponsors go beyond merely giving feedback and advice, they leverage their influence with senior leaders to promote their mentee (Ibarra et al., 2010). They support the employee by increasing their visibility within the company and helping to create opportunities for advancement. Sponsors prevent their protégé from being overlooked for opportunities that they may otherwise be overlooked for; this level of advocacy is especially effective and has been as shown to lead to the promotion of women (Ibarra et al., 2010). Despite studies highlighting the benefits of sponsorship, it is far less common than mentoring. Schwartz et al. (2023) argues that the limited use of sponsorship is due to the lack of awareness and insufficient training on how to be an effective sponsor.

Reverse Mentoring

Reverse mentoring is a modern approach where junior employees share their knowledge and expertise with senior colleagues. Chen (2013) examined the effectiveness of reverse mentoring based on the functions of mentoring: career development and social support. Unlike traditional mentoring, the mentoring dynamic is less focused on career guidance or emotional support but instead on sharing ideas and knowledge. As a sense of equity develops, younger workers increasingly feel empowered to speak for themselves rather than relying on others to advocate for them. The traditional hierarchy is broken down, allowing for mutual learning and collaboration. Additionally, reverse mentoring enhances work efficiency and outcomes as companies adapt to evolving dynamics and cultures. Murphy (2012) explains how reverse mentoring bridges generational gaps and fosters collaboration. It fosters a supportive and inclusive environment where senior employees can learn about new technologies and cultures, while junior workers can develop leadership skills, build confidence, and gain organizational knowledge. For reverse mentoring to be successful, training for both mentors and mentees, managerial support (both financial and social), and a clear pairing of roles are essential (Murphy, 2012).

METHOD

To answer the first research question regarding how exemplary US-based organizations are advancing GE in the US workplace, we identified 20 leading US-based companies that had been publicly recognized within the last five years for making significant strides in gender equity. These organizations had made commitments, won awards, or had articles written about them. They include Abbott, Accenture, Avanade, Bumble, Chobani, Cummins, Etsy, H&M, Hilton, Honeywell, L'oreal, McKinsey, MetLife, Microsoft, Munchkin, Paypal, Pepsi, Spotify, Ulta, and Visa. We read their publicly available sustainability/DEI reports and identified themes. We catalogued programs and policies these organizations had launched to advance gender equity. All 20 organizations shared a commitment to setting and tracking gender equity targets, offering mentoring and sponsorship programs for women, and supporting parents through flexible workplace policies. Once we had identified these themes, we created an interview protocol and contacted HR managers and executives in these organizations who were responsible for overseeing DEI initiatives. We used our own professional networks and connections on LinkedIn and were ultimately able to interview representatives from four of the twenty exemplary organizations.

Based on the results of the interviews, we drafted a survey to help answer our second and third research questions which sought to uncover the kinds of GE policies and practices organizations have put in place

and which of these are helping to close the gender gap. We contracted with Qualtrics to distribute the survey to HR managers and executives with DEI oversight across a broad range of companies and industries. Our goal was to learn how US-based organizations think about and approach GE, and to determine which exemplary practices are in use and whether they are having an impact. The survey included questions on gender equity practices including how they measure and track progress towards GE. We also included questions about the company's investment in women through mentoring, sponsorship, career development, resource groups, parental leave, and pay equity through both quantitative scoring and qualitative, open-ended questions. We also inquired about decision-making using a gender lens. However, after multiple rounds of piloting the survey, adding screening questions and instructions on how to answer the open-ended questions (e.g., "Please describe, in detail, your mentorship programs for women."), we determined that our approach was not working. The responses we were getting were not nearly as detailed as we wanted, and we sensed that the survey was not being answered by folks with the necessary expertise regarding their organizations' gender equity practices. To remedy the situation, we consulted with our Qualtrics project team, and they suggested switching to a different method, Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI). We agreed to pilot this method with the understanding that we required respondents to be HR managers and executives in their organizations with detailed knowledge of DEI/GE programs. Participants were recruited from multiple sources, including website recruitment, member referrals, email lists, and permission-based networks, and were compensated at varying levels based on their source of recruitment. After reviewing the data from the initial launch (i.e., 10 completed CATIs), we determined that the responses were sufficiently detailed and useable. We gave Qualtrics the go-ahead to have their vendor complete a total of 80 CATIs and accepted the results of this final round of data collection. Our testing of the data suggests that they did, in fact, find participants with the requisite knowledge and experience to give sincere and complete answers to our questions.

Below we report our respondent demographics. We have a relatively equal split of male and female respondents. The average age is in the late thirties, and the average work experience is 10 years, with 5 years at their current company. Their titles span the HR space, with the most common title being Human Resources Manager. There are executives through lower-level managers in the sample. We received responses from Chief Diversity Officers, Consultants, Coordinators, Directors, Managers, Specialists, Strategists, and Vice Presidents. Most of them had equity in their title, with many also having diversity and/or inclusion initiatives. Only a couple had the term gender in their title.

TABLE 1
RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Category/Value	N	Percentage of Sample
Gender		
Female	39	48.8%
Male	41	51.3%
Education		
Bachelor's degree	18	22.5%
Master's degree	57	71.3%
Doctoral degree	5	6.3%
Age Category		
25 - 34	28	35.0%
35 - 44	32	40.0%
45 - 54	19	23.8%
55 - 64	1	1.3%

Category/Value	N	Percentage of Sample
Years at the Company		
<5	33	41.3%
5-9	39	48.8%
<u>>=10</u>	8	10%
Years of Work Experience		
>7	18	22.5%
7-13	45	56.3%
14-20	14	17.5%
>20	3	3.8%

Below we report information collected about the firms that the respondents work in. We have the most from Technology firms, followed by Manufacturing. The companies for which the respondents work are quite large. This is not surprising, because larger firms are more likely to have specialists in Gender Equity and Diversity.

TABLE 2
EMPLOYER DEMOGRAPHICS

Category/Value	N	Percentage of Sample
Industry		
Accounting and Financial Services	11	13.8%
Utilities, Mining, & Extraction	2	2.5%
Food & Beverage, Hospitality, Arts & Entertainment	11	13.8%
Tech, Telecom, Electronics	17	21.3%
Consumer Product & Apparel	6	7.5%
Education & Nonprofit	3	3.8%
Manufacturing, Textile Mills, & construction	15	18.8%
Transportation and Waste Management	4	5.0%
Healthcare	8	10.0%
Real Estate	3	3.8%
Firm Size		
Medium-sized company: 50–249 employees	10	12.5%
Large company: 250-1,500 employees	16	20.0%
Mid-market enterprise: 1,500 - 2,000	11	13.8%
Large enterprise: 2,000 or more employees	43	53.8%

Independent Variables

Based on our initial review of the DEI reports and interviews with representatives from exemplary organizations, we included several independent quantitative variables in the CATI. These include organizational commitment to GE, mentoring, sponsorship, targets, GE data validation, making decisions with a gender lens, resource groups, and career development programs for women.

TABLE 3
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Program	Percentage of firms with program
Mentoring	58.8
Sponsorship	31.3
Targets For Gender Equity	75.0
Gender Equity Data Validated	56.3
Resource Groups	52.5
Career Development Programs For Women	40.0
Other Variables	Average Score
Average Organizational Commitment (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree Likert scale)	3.8
Gender Lens (0 does not use through 10 uses for all decisions)	
Top Management	5.9
All Levels	6.1

Dependent Variables

To measure the impact of each of the independent variables on advancing gender equity, we incorporated two dependent variables into the CATI. These include: DV 1) “Org Equitable Pay” and DV 2) “Pay Gap Range”. Org Equitable Pay is the Likert scale response to “My organization maintains equitable pay practices for all employees, regardless of gender” from Strongly disagree (1) through Strongly agree (5). The responses included each choice and averaged 3.3 (out of 5).

For the pay gap range, we provided an example calculation and then asked them to estimate which range their company’s pay gap would fall into. The question was worded as follows: “In which range does the gender pay gap fall for your organization? The gender pay gap is calculated as: $\text{Gender Pay Gap (\%)} = (\text{Average Male Salary} - \text{Average Female Salary}) / \text{Average Male Salary} \times 100$ For example: If the average salary for men is \$50,000. For women is \$45,000, the gender pay gap is: $(50,000 - 45,000) / 50,000 \times 100 = 10\%$ Interpretation: A positive GPG indicates that men earn more on average than women. In contrast, a negative GPG (rare) would indicate that women earn more on average.” There were no responses in the top category, greater than 30%, but there were responses in all the other categories, including a few in the negative pay gap range. The average suggests an approximate 7.5% pay gap at the respondents’ companies.

FINDINGS

Univariate Results

The quantitative survey data yielded some interesting results. When asked about perceptions of their organization’s and their own commitment to GE, interviewees reported their own commitment as the highest with an average of 4.5 on a scale of 1-5. Their perceptions of the level of GE commitment of senior leaders in their organization ranged from 3.5 (for “Board” and “Executives”) to 3.85 (for “my manager”). Our survey findings show that 75% of organizations in our sample set GE targets. Of those, the targets include pay equity, number of women in the organization, women new hires, participation in mentoring/sponsorships programs, and women in leadership, managerial and C-Suite positions. The most common target is percent of women in the organization (72%), whereas very few companies have targets for women in the C-suite (27%). The most reported flexible work arrangements companies implemented were leaves/sabbaticals (94%), hybrid work (71%), reduced hours or part-time work (65%), and remote work (55%). Since the pandemic, 47 companies reported an increase, 13 a decrease, and 20 no change in the organization’s gender equity.

More than half of the companies reported having mentoring programs (59%) and resource groups (53%) for women. Of the companies offering mentoring programs, only 40% have a target for the level of women participating. 31% of companies offer sponsorship programs and 40% provide career development opportunities. Overall, the quantitative data suggest that most companies are doing something, but that substantial, across-the-board progress has not been achieved.

Regression Analysis

As shown in Table 5, in analyzing DV 1 (Organizational Equitable Pay), we found that equitable pay tends to be higher in organizations that implement mentoring programs, set gender equity targets, and apply a gender lens across all levels. This finding is robust to controlling for industry. These results are consistent with the qualitative analysis below. To explain DV 2 (Pay Gap), we used the same independent variables identified from our analysis of best practices. Once again, as shown in Table 6, organizational mentoring proved significant—greater use of mentoring is associated with a smaller pay gap. Additionally, organizations that validate their data through a third party tend to have lower pay gaps. This external validation may increase awareness of the issue, prompting stronger efforts to reduce the gap.

TABLE 5
REGRESSION ANALYSIS ORGANIZATIONAL EQUITABLE PAY

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	
Intercept	0.857	0.677	1.267	0.21	
Avg Commit	0.069	0.221	0.310	0.76	
Org Mentoring	0.370	0.216	1.713	0.09	**
Org Sponsorship	0.201	0.217	0.925	0.36	
Does Org Have Targets	0.415	0.274	1.517	0.13	*
Ge Data Validated 3rd Party	0.104	0.265	0.393	0.70	
Gender Lens Top Mgmt	0.034	0.087	0.394	0.70	
Gender Lens All Levels	0.206	0.105	1.970	0.05	**
Resource Groups Women	0.083	0.197	0.420	0.68	
Career Development Women	0.087	0.187	0.468	0.64	

** - significant at $p < .05$ one tailed

* - significant at $p < .10$ one tailed

Adjusted $R^2 = 52.5\%$

TABLE 6
REGRESSION ANALYSIS PAY GAP RANGE

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	
Intercept	3.439	1.083	3.175	0.00	**
Avg Commit	0.292	0.354	0.823	0.41	
Org Mentoring	(0.725)	0.346	(2.094)	0.04	**
Org Sponsorship	(0.352)	0.347	(1.013)	0.31	
Does Org Have Targets	0.102	0.438	0.232	0.82	
Ge Data Validated 3rd Party	(0.743)	0.425	(1.749)	0.08	**
Gender Lens Top	(0.029)	0.140	(0.205)	0.84	
Gender Lens All Levels	(0.145)	0.168	(0.863)	0.39	
Resource Groups Women	0.004	0.315	0.013	0.99	
Career Development Women	(0.087)	0.299	(0.292)	0.77	

** - significant at $p < .05$ one tailed

* - significant at $p < .10$ one tailed

Adjusted $R^2 = 22.9\%$

Qualitative Support for Mentoring Programs

Based on the quantitative results that provide evidence that mentoring has a significant positive impact on increasing organizational equitable pay and decreasing the gender pay gap, we turned to the qualitative data we collected through the prompt, “In three to five sentences, please provide a detailed description of your organization’s formal mentoring programs for women, including specific initiatives and activities your organization undertakes to mentor women effectively.” We analyzed all the responses we received and made note of keywords and recurring themes. What we discovered is that most companies offering formal mentoring programs for women had crafted comprehensive initiatives that primarily focused on leadership development, helping women create networks of supporters, set goals, and receive feedback. Below, we provide several examples of how our respondents described their organization’s mentoring program(s), along with additional supporting quotes in Table 7. It is essential to note that the three areas of focus we highlight are not mutually exclusive, as many organizations incorporate two, or even all three, into their mentoring initiatives.

Programs Focused on Leadership Development

Across industries, we found examples of organizations incorporating leadership development into their mentoring programs. For example, a Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer from a large enterprise in the food & beverage industry explained they match women with mentors and provide leadership coaching to prepare them for advancement opportunities, “...we match them with mentors who have been in their shoes and know how to handle real world situations. Along with that, we also have sessions with senior executives to gain a better understanding of the challenges women might face...On top of that we provide leadership coaching, so they are ready when bigger opportunities come their way.”

A Gender Equity Officer from a large enterprise in the healthcare industry explained how important leadership development workshops and seminars are to enhancing their mentoring programs, “While our mentoring programs are a critical part of our efforts, we also take it a step further by providing a comprehensive series of leadership development workshops and seminars...We focus on core leadership competencies such as strategic decision making, negotiation skills, and conflict resolution. But we also address areas like building confidence and cultivating a visionary approach to leadership and for the mentors themselves it is incredibly rewarding”.

An Inclusive Leadership & Organizational Development Leader from a large enterprise in the education industry described how senior mentors focus on helping their mentees develop leadership skills: “Our approach has enabled us to implement various professional mentoring programs across different sectors of our organization. A highlight is our initiative focused on developing leadership skills among women employees by connecting them with senior mentors. This program aligns with our leadership framework, emphasizing the importance of strong relationships, resource development, and motivating individuals through a clear vision.”

An HR manager in a large company in the hospitality industry described their approach to mentoring as providing guidance and training to help women advance into leadership roles, “Our focus is on the personal and professional growth of our women through this mentorship program. We carefully match participants with mentors, ensuring each individual receives guidance tailored to their unique career aspirations...this program also includes training sessions designed to enhance essential skills such as leadership, networking, and financial acumen, because we believe that these skills provide women with the foundation they need to advance their careers and succeed in leadership roles.”

Finally, the Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in a medium-sized company in the textiles and apparel industry explained how experienced leaders who serve as mentors, as well as leadership seminars, support women’s growth in the organization: “Our mentoring programs empower women by connecting them with experienced leaders who can offer valuable insights into career advancement and leadership skills and our goal is to promote growth and productivity among women in the organization and to our mission we provide many resources including leadership seminars, skill building workshops and support groups. These initiatives are designed to improve the mentoring experience and give the way for a brighter future.”

Programs Focused on Building a Network

A Diversity Manager at a large company in the food and beverage industry explained how they provide both formal and informal networking opportunities as part of their mentoring programs for women, “What we actually do to help and support our women employees are that we offer them a structured mentorship program that includes coaching, project-based learning, valuable networking opportunities with senior leaders, which has helped them to gain a deep understanding of the business environment. Additionally, we have informal groups or circles that facilitate discussions and support among women within the organization, focusing on topics such as career advancement and overcoming workplace challenges. So, these groups also help and serve as an informal mentorship network where women can share experiences and advice.”

A Women’s Advancement Lead in a large construction enterprise described the mentoring program she herself is a part of as having a major impact on her career thanks to the network she gained access to, “Before I became part of the mentoring program, stepping into leadership roles felt more like a dream than a possibility. My mentor’s guidance changed everything...Her encouragement to take on challenging assignments, combined with introductions to influential networks, opened doors I had not thought were accessible. For the first time, I felt like I belonged at the decision-making table, bringing a fresh, unique voice to leadership conversations. What stood out the most was how the program extended beyond individual mentoring. It connected me to a larger network of ambitious, supportive women. We cheered each other’s victories and leaned on one another through tough times, creating a culture of shared success and mutual empowerment.”

A Diversity Engagement Manager in a mid-market enterprise in the technology services sector explained how networking opportunities with senior leaders is a central part of their mentoring program, “...we have a mentoring program dedicated to women, where they are paired with senior leaders who go beyond giving career advice...We also offer interactive workshops on communication and self-advocacy, as well as opportunities for mentees to network with senior leaders. In addition to regular check-ins, we have group sessions where women can share experiences. A standout feature is our leadership roundtables, where mentees have direct access to senior executives, ask questions, and gain insights.”

An Advisor for Gender Balance in a large enterprise in the arts and entertainment industry described the networks that women create through their mentorship program are key to their success, “They get to attend events, stay on top of new trends, learn smart strategies and pick up tips from the best in the biz. They get to rub elbows with some key players and build solid networks. Those connections are a total game changer. They grow, they get seen and it sets them up for future success. We also run other stuff like mentoring circles where women swap ideas and advice in small groups.”

Programs Focused on Setting Goals and Providing Feedback

Finally, several of our respondents emphasized the importance of goal setting and providing feedback as part of their mentorship programs. For example, an HR manager in a mid-market enterprise in the real estate sector explained how goals were essential to the mentoring initiative – both for each individual mentee’s growth as well as for the organization to track the success of the program, “These mentorship relationships are incredible. They set clear, measurable development goals and provide super constructive feedback. And the best part is not just about individual growth; it is about building more innovative and dynamic teams. And I believe that when women succeed, everyone gets inspired, because there is a sense of incredible energy that spreads when someone breaks through barriers and achieves something remarkable. It motivates the entire team. We are not just launching these programs and walking away. Our leadership team does a thorough annual review, evaluating the program’s impact and making adjustments.”

An Equity and Inclusion Director in a large enterprise in the electronics industry explained the importance of providing regular feedback and outlining clear steps for professional growth, “Our program is all about giving women the tools they need to grow in their careers and continuous feedback is a big part of that. We ensure that we provide constructive feedback regularly, not only pointing out areas for improvement but also highlighting strengths and offering clear, actionable steps for growth. It is not just about fixing weaknesses, it is about building on what they are already great at...At the end of the day this

approach helps women feel more confident and satisfied in their jobs, perform better and move forward in their careers. It is all about setting them up for long-term success.”

A Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator in a large enterprise in the financial services industry described the importance of mentors providing mentees with formative feedback, “Absolutely our mentoring programs are something we are incredibly proud of...Through these programs we pair them with experienced mentors who have a wealth of knowledge to share. These mentors do not just offer career advice, but they actively engage in open and ongoing discussions and providing formative feedback. It is about creating a space where women feel supported and empowered to ask questions...Women who have participated often share how impactful it has been to have someone in their corner.”

A Gender Equity Specialist in a large enterprise in the financial services industry explained how mentees have specific goals and a career roadmap to help them advance in their careers, “What I love about our mentoring program is how hands-on and structured it is and we have a clear plan in place. At our company, mentees work on quarterly goals, such as developing leadership skills or preparing for a promotion. The mentors are deeply invested in helping them create a career roadmap and navigate challenges. We also host networking events and panel discussions where mentees can hear directly from senior women leaders who’ve faced similar experiences. Some of our programs focus specifically on issues women encounter in the workplace, such as negotiating salaries or building a professional network. We also offer shadowing opportunities, so mentees can observe mentors in action, from leading meetings to making tough decisions.”

Our qualitative results highlight the importance of mentoring in developing leadership skills, building networks, setting goals, and providing feedback to promote gender equity in organizations. Below, we provide additional quotes that support these key outcomes of mentorship.

TABLE 7
ADDITIONAL SUPPORTING QUOTES

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Company Size</i>	<i>Example Quotes</i>
Financial services	Large enterprise (2,000 or more employees)	One thing I have been excited about lately is our company’s mentorship program for women. It’s been such a rewarding experience. Basically, the idea was to connect women at different stages of their careers with mentors who can provide guidance or share their insights and be there to help with everything from career advancement to balancing personal and professional life . It is amazing to see how these connections are really helping women grow. What is great about it is that our women’s business resource groups run a lot of awesome initiatives like one-on-one mentoring and leadership discussions . Like these events help women build connections with senior leaders and create those important relationships. This also focuses on giving women and underrepresented groups the tools to move into leadership roles and help the experienced women in leadership to refine their skills and tackle new challenges.

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Company Size</i>	<i>Example Quotes</i>
Financial services	Large enterprise (2,000 or more employees)	One of the greatest benefits of our women's mentoring programs is the opportunity to build self-confidence and enhance leadership skills ...The key here is that women are provided with access to role models who demonstrate that leadership is not only possible but achievable, and that their voices absolutely matter in the workplace. In addition to that, these programs offer a great deal of encouragement, allowing women to recognize their strengths and take risks with a newfound confidence, especially when it comes to developing leadership abilities. I truly believe that these programs help instill a strong sense of self-assurance in women, empowering them to advocate for themselves and pursue more challenging projects and both of which are critical for career advancement.
Accounting	Large enterprise (2,000 or more employees)	We have put together this legit mentoring program for women . It is not like the typical sit and learn deal. We are focused on hands-on skill training that is totally relevant with some insider knowledge about how things work in our company and the industry at large. You know things that is actually useful like understanding the big picture, navigating different challenges, and picking up the kinda critical thinking skills that you cannot just Google. The whole vibe is about building confidence not just in the short term but in a way that sticks. We want women to walk away feeling like yeah, I got this whether they are stepping into a leadership role or making big moves in their current position .
Construction	Large company (250-1,500 employees)	Our women's collaborative program serves as the foundation of our formal mentoring initiative which supports the advancement of women in construction . We connect women at all levels of the company with experienced leaders who guide them in career development and relevant leadership skills needed in this industry. They receive comprehensive training and valuable tips to support their future careers by providing them with guidance into leadership roles and responsibilities. Our program is not adhoc as it is a carefully structured and intentional initiative.
Real estate	Medium-sized company (50-249 employees)	We at our organization have established a dedicated mentoring program to support and guide our employees in developing their leadership skills . We aim to empower our employees to learn how to have a better work life balance while acquiring skills that will benefit them in the future and our plan includes preparing them to manage stress and get innovative or bring creative approaches to their work. At our mentoring program we organize quarterly leadership development workshops and promote networking groups.

Healthcare	Large enterprise (2,000 or more employees)	So yeah, you can say that our organization has always believed in women and their potential. And now to support them and empower them we have a bunch of mentoring programs. These programs help in creating opportunities as they have got these peer groups where they can connect and learn from experienced leaders who do not just give them advice but also introduce them to all sorts of people and opportunities they might not even know existed. It is like opening doors to a whole new world. Lastly, having a mentor is like having a friend in your corner, they are there to give you advice and guide you in the right direction or cheer you when you feel low.
Technology services	Large enterprise (2,000 or more employees)	To empower female employees, the organization has launched a detailed program designed to encourage open discussions about the personal and professional challenges they face. Mentors within the program actively share their own experiences, providing actionable insights and strategies to help them overcome barriers and achieve their goals. The initiative aims to build confidence and create a stronger sense of community. Furthermore, we have implemented a structured pairing system where senior employees mentor new joiners , guiding them through office politics, organizational norms, and workplace culture to ensure a seamless onboarding experience.
Transportation	Large enterprise (2,000 or more employees)	We adhere to the need for these types of programs for women in the transportation industry and considering this we have participated in events multiple times for awareness among women in transportation one of which is WTS International which majorly focuses on discussions on challenges and networking related opportunities that highlights women leaders within our organization and transportation sector. Experienced employees often mentor newcomers and it's just a part of our organizational culture.
Consumer products	Large enterprise (2,000 or more employees)	To enhance the ability of the female employees we organize mentorship programs so that can shape their talent and be more proactive in the workspace. For mentoring, I believe women mentoring other women creates a more positive and relatable environment, allowing young women to connect deeply and gain valuable insights from seasoned professionals in their field. I think female mentorships in the workplace can guide young professionals in effectively climbing the career ladder, particularly in male-dominated industries. In addition, we have got a great response and participation from the female employees for our contribution to their success.
Manufacturing	Large enterprise (2,000 or more employees)	To support the career growth of women at our company we offer a dedicated mentorship program that pairs women with senior mentors who can share their expertise or offer career advice and help them in reaching their full potential. We know that this industry in particular has traditionally been male dominated so we wanted to make sure we are actively promoting diversity and empowering women in their careers.

<i>Industry</i>	<i>Company Size</i>	<i>Example Quotes</i>
Technology services	Mid-market enterprise (1,500 - 2,000 employees)	This is particularly significant for women starting in their careers, as guidance from knowledgeable professionals can really help in sharpen their skills and building confidence . Mentors also assist in setting achievable goals and expanding professional networks , which are key for career growth. Moreover, having female mentorships in our workplace is essential for young professionals, especially in sectors that are predominantly male. Such relationships allow young women to meet mentors who can provide networking opportunities and advocate for their career advancements. By investing in mentorship for women, we not only work towards closing the gender leadership gap but also pave the way for a brighter future for them.

In addition to the primary themes of leadership development, networking, goals and feedback, we also uncovered some innovative elements that some of the organizations in our sample have incorporated. While these themes are less prevalent than the others, we believe that they are worth discussing. These include reverse mentoring and involving men in women's advancement. In the case of reverse mentoring, "...a younger employee becomes the mentor...to share expertise and skills with older people who need such competences and to build a community whose members support each other" (Gadomska-Lila, 2020). Involving men ranged from including men in important discussions about women's experiences in the workplace to serving as allies and even mentors. Below we provide some examples of each.

Reverse Mentoring

One Manager of Equity and Inclusion in a mid-market organization in the healthcare industry explained a focus on leadership development and peer mentoring but also described how junior employees serve as reverse mentors, giving them access to senior leadership, "Our company offers a variety of mentorship programs, each with clear benefits, particularly in the leadership development of women. For example, in peer mentoring, both parties take turns as the mentor, which promotes mutual learning in a balanced and supportive environment. We also offer reverse mentoring, which enables junior female employees to mentor senior leaders, particularly in areas such as digital literacy and cultural competency. This type of mentoring allows junior employees to have direct, one-on-one access to senior leadership, allowing them to share their knowledge and skills."

A Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion in a large technology services company described the role of reverse mentoring in helping seniors gain a better understanding of their younger female employees' needs, "We are really committed to promoting women and creating opportunities for them to thrive. One of the key areas we focus on is promoting women from diverse backgrounds through internal opportunities. As part of our efforts to bridge generational gaps we have initiated a reverse mentoring program. In this program, the junior-most female employee mentors the senior-most employee, ensuring that senior leaders gain a clearer understanding of the concerns and desires of younger employees. We are all about making gender diversity a priority with transparent initiatives and fostering an environment that is genuinely supportive of women — and let me tell you, that has been a game changer. The more women we have in leadership the more we see them stepping into senior roles."

A Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in a medium-sized financial services firm described reverse mentoring as a new mentoring initiative for women, "What we are all about is mentoring women in a way that gets them pumped to pitch fresh ideas and flex their strategic thinking. This kind of support is not just about helping them grow, but it is also about helping them step into leadership roles where they can excel and continue to achieve success. Last year we launched several mentorship programs, like a reverse mentoring program and a language learning program. It is all about giving them the resources to level up and lead with confidence." Another respondent in a large manufacturing enterprise explained the

use of both traditional and reverse mentoring to advance women's progression development, "And so we have this program as a mentorship network. The primary objective of this program is to utilize mentorship as a strategic tool to enhance women's professional development and foster a more balanced and equitable industry. What I like about this network is that it allows for both traditional and reverse mentoring on topics like diversity and workplace dynamics."

Involving Men

With regards to involving men in mentoring initiatives targeted at helping women to advance, the Equity and Inclusion Director in a large financial services enterprise explained how promising women are matched with both senior female leaders and male allies to help them advance, "While our gender equity efforts are still evolving, we have launched a multi-layered mentoring initiative to support the career growth and leadership development of women in our organization. This program pairs promising women with senior female leaders and accomplished male allies who offer guidance, share career insights, and help create opportunities to develop skills, expand their networks, and increase visibility within the company.

Another participant, the Manager of Equity and Inclusion at a mid-market telecom company, emphasized the importance of including male mentors in the program to help advance gender equity in the workplace, "One of our primary focuses is to help women in leadership roles by giving them the tools and support they need to succeed. We aim to provide women with the resources that enable them to fully realize their potential, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and diverse workplace. Furthermore, we also believe that including male mentors in the process is essential. It is essential for men to gain insight into the challenges women face, whether related to pay parity or the responsibilities that women often juggle. By offering a broader perspective, male mentors can contribute to driving positive change in the workplace."

The Diversity and Inclusion Strategist from a large financial services enterprise shared his own experience of being exposed to mentoring sessions for women and how this improved his approach to supporting women, "Our organization's mentoring program, which supports women in the workplace, has truly amazed me. These programs not only support women, but they also challenge men like me to consider our perspectives on people and work. We guys begin to see things differently when we set up the way for women to achieve. The topics of leadership, work life balance, and overcoming naive thinking are all freely discussed during these mentorship sessions. The nicest aspect is seeing how these programs help women to achieve remarkable success in their careers." They explained that both male and female senior leaders are involved in mentoring women in the firm, "At our company, we take inclusivity seriously through our women's sponsorship programs. These are genuine commitments to support women's development and success, not merely boxes on a diversity form. I have seen firsthand how our senior leaders both men and women have stepped up to guide and assist female colleagues. They are generating tangible opportunities rather than only giving recommendations. This entails giving women access to influential professional networks, actively assisting them in their endeavors, and ensuring that they have a significant say in crucial business decisions."

DISCUSSION

The recent decline in government support for DEI programs in the United States is concerning and ensuring that women continue to advance in organizations is critical for the vitality of the U.S. workforce. Fortunately, advancing gender equity in the US workplace is possible, as demonstrated by our qualitative, interview-based pilot study and the responses to our CATIs from 80 organizations. In the following sections, we highlight the contributions of our work to the scholarship on women's career advancement and, in particular, mentoring/sponsorship. We then highlight the practical implications of our work and discuss its limitations, as well as future research directions.

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that structured gender equity (GE) initiatives, particularly formal mentoring and sponsorship programs, can significantly improve women's workplace outcomes. Our analysis highlights mentoring as a standout intervention, with links to more equitable pay

practices and narrower gender pay gaps. Despite its relative ubiquity, mentoring still lacks consistency in design and execution, especially when compared to sponsorship, which remains underutilized. While 59% of organizations report having mentoring programs, only 31% offer sponsorship. This discrepancy points to a critical missed opportunity.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Our study makes two key contributions to research on advancing gender equity in organizations. First, we demonstrate that mentoring programs for women have significant positive association with organizational equitable pay. While we also tested for the impact of sponsorship, which did not emerge as significant, the qualitative results of our CATI indicate that many organizations have developed mentoring programs for women that incorporate elements of sponsorship, such as advocacy by senior leaders on behalf of their mentees (Ibarra et al., 2010). Setting GE targets and having a gender lens at all levels of the organization also showed to have a significant positive relationship with organizational equitable pay, while having GE data validated by a third party had a significant negative relationship with the gender pay gap. We focus our findings and conclusions on mentoring/sponsorship as we were able to capture detailed explanations of these programs through the CATI open-ended questions.

Our second contribution to the literature is identifying the aspects of women's mentoring programs that our DEI expert respondents described. First, we found that leadership development and networking opportunities are key aspects of mentoring for women, validating previous studies (see Yu, 2020). Another factor we uncovered, currently less emphasized in the literature on women's career advancement, is setting goals and providing feedback. Many of our respondents described the importance of this formal aspect of their mentoring programs. Two unexpected features that some of our respondents described were reverse mentoring (Chen, 2013) and involving men. Reverse mentoring has been shown to be beneficial to both the junior mentor and the more senior mentee. For the junior mentor, a key benefit is leadership development and career growth (Murphy, 2021). Involving men in mentoring programs and discussions may help mitigate the lack of respect that women in many professions face from male colleagues (Yu, 2015) and increase male advocacy in the workplace (Olsen & LaGree, 2023).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Like all research projects, our study has its limitations. First, we were only able to interview representatives from four of the twenty exemplary organizations we identified as part of the pilot study. We may have gleaned important insights from additional interviews. Second, our use of the CATI method by a third party made it impossible for us to ask follow-up questions. However, the CATIs were administered by Qualtrics, and we feel confident that their trained interviewers were able to elicit detailed responses, especially after numerous rounds of revising and improving the survey. Finally, our results are based on data from 80 organizations that span a wide range of industries and sizes. Future research could focus on specific industries to compare and contrast best practices for advancing gender equity in the US workplace. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to examine how employee perceptions of an organization's commitment to GE align with those of managers, senior leaders, and board members, as well as to explore the implications of these variations by level.

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