

Women in UK Manufacturing 2025: leading with inclusion

**A review of best practices for advancing
inclusive leadership**



About this report

The *Women in UK Manufacturing 2025* report provides an overview of the progress made over the past year and the challenges that remain for women in the manufacturing sector. This edition focuses on leadership and inclusion, examining how workplace culture and organisational practices shape women's participation and advancement. It combines sector-wide data with insights from surveys and interviews, offering evidence-based analysis of the barriers and opportunities that shape women's experiences in manufacturing. The report provides guiding principles to lead with inclusion and calls for manufacturing leaders to work collectively to advance gender equality and strengthen the sector's future. The report findings are independent and represent the views of the authors but have been enabled by IfM Engage and Cambridge Industrial Innovation Policy (Institute for Manufacturing, University of Cambridge) and our 2025 WiM UK conference sponsors – Lloyds, Carlsberg Britvic, Arla Foods, and Enginuity.

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Foreword

Inclusion is not a passing trend. Creating a safe and inclusive workplace is a modern leadership priority. It involves valuing differences among team members, fostering an environment where everyone can be authentic, and encouraging innovation to flourish.

At a time when the UK manufacturing sector faces demographic shifts, rapid technological change, and increasing global competition, the need to lead with inclusion has never been more urgent. Building inclusive cultures is no longer optional; it is essential for resilience, competitiveness, and growth.

The discussion on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is continuously developing. Even the terminology we use to describe inclusive workplaces is open to debate and contestation. However, what is clear is that inclusive leadership must steer our sector forwards – from the boardroom to the shop floor.

This report provides a timely, evidence-based review of how inclusive leadership can shape the sector's future. It highlights the progress made in women's representation, while also examining the barriers that persist, particularly for women from under-represented backgrounds. It offers guiding principles and practical steps to help leaders cultivate cultures of fairness, trust, and belonging.

Encouragingly, women's participation in the manufacturing workforce has increased to 28.4%, a rise of 1.6 percentage points since last year. Representation in manager, director, and senior roles has also continued to increase, reaching 24.8% in 2024. This marks significant progress towards our goal of achieving 35% representation by 2035. Although these gains are incremental, they show that change is achievable and that collective commitment yields results.

As manufacturers, we know our future success depends on our ability to attract, retain, and empower people from all backgrounds. The insights captured in this report underline the importance of listening to lived experiences, challenging outdated practices, and embedding equity into every level of our organisations. As members of the Women in Manufacturing Industry Advisory Board, we are proud to support this work and urge sector leaders to champion the guiding principles, fostering positive change and raising awareness across the industry.

Let us go beyond symbolic gestures and ensure that inclusion is integrated into every policy, practice, and conversation. By championing inclusion, we can create a manufacturing sector where everyone has the chance to succeed and, in doing so, build a stronger and more sustainable future for UK industry.

Women in Manufacturing UK Industrial Advisory Board

Executive summary

In today's complex environment, where leaders must juggle competing priorities and navigate polarising public messages, UK business leaders and policymakers have a unique chance to show that diversity and inclusion are not optional values but essential drivers of competitiveness, innovation, and long-term resilience.

Diversity in the UK manufacturing sector has shown signs of progress, even as debates around gender equality grow more contested. From a policy perspective, the launch of the Equality Charter under the Advanced Manufacturing Sector Plan and the adoption of the "35 by 35" target represent important commitments, aligned with those of the Women in Manufacturing (WiM) UK initiative.¹

But challenges remain, and demographic trends heighten the urgent need to improve workforce diversity in the sector. Nearly a quarter of the manufacturing workforce is expected to reach retirement age within the next decade. This represents more than 600,000 people, 74% of whom are men.²

This report reviews the progress achieved, the setbacks faced, and the ongoing challenges in advancing diversity and inclusion within UK manufacturing. The thematic focus of this edition is inclusive leadership, recognised as a critical factor in attracting and retaining talent from all backgrounds. The report explores how workplace culture and organisational practices influence women's participation and career progression. It sets out five guiding principles, accompanied by practical actions and case studies, to illustrate how manufacturing leaders can foster more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

State of diversity and inclusion in UK manufacturing in 2024

1. Share of women in manufacturing workforce rose to 28.4% in 2024



Women's representation in the manufacturing workforce reached 28.4% in 2024, a rise of 1.6 percentage points from 2023. However, manufacturing remains among the sectors with the lowest participation of women, and stronger commitment will be required to achieve the "35 by 35" target.

2. Women continue to gain ground in manufacturing leadership



Women's participation in managerial, director, and senior positions has consistently improved, reaching 24.8% in 2024, an increase of one percentage point from 2023.

After the decline in 2023, women's representation in professional occupations, including engineering, improved in 2024. It rose by 3.1 percentage points to

¹ UK Government (2025). *Advanced Manufacturing Sector Plan*. The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy.

² ONS (2025). Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2024. 2nd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 9354, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9354-2>

27.2% in professional roles, and by 3.6 points to 36.2% in associate professional and technical roles.

3. Women from non-White backgrounds saw progress in their representation in UK manufacturing in 2024



Among the women employed in manufacturing, 19.2% identify as disabled, while 13.5% are from non-White ethnic backgrounds, a proportion slightly below the UK average across those employed. Over the past year, the proportion of women from non-White ethnic backgrounds increased significantly, rising from 9.6% in 2023 to 13.5% in 2024. The largest increases were recorded among women from Indian, Black, and other Asian backgrounds.³

4. The gender pay gap continues to narrow, but women still earn 14.9% less than men



In 2024 women in the manufacturing sector earned 14.9% less than men.⁴ Despite this improvement, the sector still lags behind the national average gap, which is 13.1%, by almost 2 percentage points.

5. UK advances among leading manufacturing nations in women's representation



Among the world's leading manufacturing nations, the UK improved its ranking, moving from 15th place in 2023 to 11th in 2024.

Perspectives on inclusive leadership

As part of the work for this report, we conducted an online survey of 63 participants and 14 interviews to examine how leadership practices influence workplace culture. Combined with a review of relevant literature, this analysis highlighted the central role of leadership in shaping inclusive environments and identified the specific qualities that enable leaders to foster more diverse, equitable, and supportive workplaces.

Inclusive leadership is characterised by a clear commitment and a proactive approach to uphold fairness and equity, foster a sense of belonging, and create an environment where team members feel safe to contribute authentically and where their individuality is valued.

³ ONS (2025). Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2024. 2nd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 9354, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9354-2>

⁴ Difference between average hourly earnings (excluding overtime) of men and women as a proportion of men's average hourly earnings (excluding overtime), based on median values.

Key inclusive leadership qualities and practices highlighted by those consulted include the following:

Job attractiveness factors vary across demographic groups. Flexible working is more important for women, disabled people and those with long-term health conditions or neurodivergence



Across all survey participants, fair and competitive pay, career development, opportunities for skills development, job security, and diversity and inclusion ranked highest. Interestingly, men placed less importance on flexible working, health and wellbeing programmes, and fair and competitive pay than women, disabled people and those with long-term health conditions or neurodivergence.

Open and transparent communication is the most valued quality of leadership



Across all survey participants, open and transparent communication is the most valued quality of leadership. Disabled people, and those with long-term conditions or neurodivergence, as well as those who have left manufacturing, place particular emphasis on leaders recognising and valuing contributions.

Feeling undervalued and limited career progression opportunities are leading reasons for leaving manufacturing



Among survey participants who have left manufacturing, 75% cited feeling undervalued as a key reason. Other frequently reported factors include: limited career progression opportunities (58%), non-inclusive workplace environments (42%), and challenges with work–life balance (33%). Of particular concern, both survey and interview participants highlighted the persistence of discriminatory behaviours such as misogyny, ageism, racism, abusive language, and harassment.

Significant opportunities to improve support for employees with health conditions



Among survey participants, 46% of women experiencing menopause symptoms reported a negative impact on their work, with 39% facing associated discrimination or barriers. In addition, nearly half of respondents with a disability, long-term health condition, or neurodivergence reported experiencing discrimination or workplace barriers linked to their condition.

Guiding principles to lead with inclusion

Drawing on the literature on inclusive leadership and insights from our survey and interviews, we identified five key principles to promote more inclusive workplace cultures in the manufacturing sector.

1. Fairness, respect, and trust



Inclusive cultures begin with fairness and equity in how employees are treated and supported. Leaders must ensure resources and opportunities are accessible to everyone and adaptable to individual needs. Building trust requires openness, respect across all levels, and a visible commitment to recognising contributions. Practical steps that leaders can take include:

- Treating all team members fairly, ensuring equity and transparency in how people are supported and recognised
- Guaranteeing accessibility of resources, infrastructure and equipment, adapting them to meet individual needs, and
- Embedding respect and anti-discrimination commitments into codes of conduct and enforcement mechanisms to ensure accountability.

2. Open communication and valuing uniqueness



A crucial aspect of inclusive leadership is to create safe spaces where employees can voice concerns and share ideas. Open communication is essential in building this environment, as it signals transparency, trust, and respect from leaders. Equally important is valuing uniqueness, including recognising and appreciating the distinct skills, perspectives, and experiences that individuals bring. Practical steps that leaders can take include:

- Establishing formal channels for open, two-way communication, such as forums, anonymous reporting, and 360-degree feedback
- Actively recognising and rewarding diverse perspectives to solve business challenges and as a driver of continuous improvement, and
- Encouraging experimentation and risk-taking, particularly in eco-innovation and digital transformation initiatives.

3. Equitable career development opportunities



Transparent and fair career pathways give employees confidence that advancement is based on merit rather than informal networks or bias. When career development is equitable, it reduces turnover and strengthens employee motivation and engagement. Practical steps that leaders can take include:

- Developing clear career pathways and communicating them openly to all employees
- Providing mentoring, sponsorship, and training opportunities

- Aligning performance evaluations with inclusive behaviours, and
- Regularly reviewing pay structures and promotion practices to address inequities.

4. Wellbeing and life stage support

Inclusion requires recognising diverse life stages and health needs. Practical steps that leaders can take include:



- Adopting flexible working arrangements by identifying solutions that balance individual needs, job requirements, and business demands
- Ensuring facilities, equipment, and uniforms are accessible to all employees
- Introducing practical menopause support, such as adjusted work schedules, access to tailored resources, and greater awareness across teams and managers, and
- Providing regular communication and tailored support to employees returning from extended leave, ensuring they are effectively included and feel valued on their return.

5. Social impact

Aligning inclusive leadership with broader societal and environmental goals is essential for building resilient and future-focused organisations. By embedding these priorities into workplace practices, leaders strengthen organisational identity and inspire employees to take shared responsibility for challenges such as climate action, community wellbeing, and equitable social development. Practical steps that leaders can take include:



- Partnering with local communities to address regional disparities and reduce social inequalities
- Inspiring collective responsibility for environmental goals by recognising, rewarding, and scaling eco-friendly behaviours and practices, and
- Encouraging and supporting employee-led sustainability initiatives, including environmental projects and volunteering activities that benefit society.
- Promoting diversity and inclusion within your supply chain by engaging businesses owned by under-represented groups, partnering with inclusive companies, and ensuring that both direct and indirect employees experience fair working conditions.

A call to action

We call on business leaders and policymakers to place inclusive leadership at the core of their work, and to support the development and launch of a UK Manufacturing Equality Charter, ensuring that diversity and inclusion are recognised not as compliance obligations but as strategic drivers of competitiveness, innovation, and long-term sustainability. Building on the framework outlined in our *Women in UK Manufacturing 2024* report,⁵ we have identified five key priority actions for business leaders:

1. ***Champion equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in leadership.*** Ensure that a dedicated board- or senior-level leader is responsible for driving and monitoring EDI initiatives across the organisation. Leverage your role to influence change and promote awareness across your network.
2. ***Assess the current state of workforce diversity and inclusion.*** Conduct an assessment of the organisation's current diversity and inclusion landscape to identify gaps and opportunities.
3. ***Define the organisation's EDI vision and targets through participation.*** Engage employees and other stakeholders in a participatory process to define a clear EDI vision and set measurable targets that align with the organisation's goals.
4. ***Identify key initiatives and engage employees.*** Develop targeted initiatives to achieve the EDI vision and goals, ensuring active employee engagement.
5. ***Monitor progress.*** Establish mechanisms for regular monitoring and reporting of progress.

Strategic and programme leaders can accelerate more inclusive cultures in manufacturing by:

1. ***Investing in research and analysis*** to build a robust evidence base on the effectiveness and impact of EDI initiatives.
2. ***Embedding inclusive communication practices*** across all programmes and projects using inclusive language and imagery, and ensuring dissemination activities reach women's professional networks and other organisations championing under-represented groups.
3. ***Setting clear participation and representation targets*** to promote balanced representation and participation of different demographic groups in support programmes. For example, programmes could aim for 30%–40% of supported companies to be women-led or women-owned.
4. ***Integrating EDI-related indicators*** into project assessment criteria and outcomes frameworks, ensuring EDI considerations are embedded throughout the evaluation process. For example, to promote institutional change, the EU has included having a gender equality plan as an eligibility criterion to gain access to Horizon Europe.⁶
5. ***Conducting EDI impact assessments*** to identify and mitigate any potential negative effects of policies or initiatives.

⁵ Castañeda-Navarrete, J. et al. (2023). *Women in UK Manufacturing 2024: Addressing labour shortages and bridging the gender gap. A review of best practices for diversity and inclusion*. University of Cambridge.

⁶ EU (2021). *Horizon Europe. Gender equality. A strengthened commitment in Horizon Europe*. doi:10.2777/410001

Introduction

In today's complex environment, where leaders must juggle competing priorities and navigate polarising public messages, UK business leaders and policymakers have a unique chance to show that diversity and inclusion are not optional values but essential drivers of competitiveness, innovation, and long-term resilience.

Diversity in the UK manufacturing sector has shown signs of progress, despite debates around gender equality becoming increasingly contentious. In 2024 women's participation in the workforce reached 28.4%, an increase from the previous year. Gains were also seen in women's representation in leadership and technical roles, along with a continued narrowing of the gender pay gap.

From a policy perspective, the launch of the Equality Charter under the Advanced Manufacturing Sector Plan and adoption of the "35 by 35" target represent important commitments, aligned with those from the WiM UK initiative.⁷

Despite this momentum, significant challenges remain. Gender pay gaps widen as women progress in their careers, while retention continues to be a pressing concern. For disabled women, women from non-White backgrounds and those managing health conditions, barriers to advancement are even more pronounced.

Since productivity and competitiveness are closely linked to social reproduction, it is also essential that sufficient investments be allocated to both expanding state-funded childcare hours and strengthening the social care system more broadly.

Demographic trends heighten the urgent need to improve workforce diversity. Nearly one-quarter of the manufacturing workforce is expected to reach retirement age within the next decade. This represents more than 600,000 people, 74% of whom are men.⁸ Addressing these dynamics by broadening participation among women and younger populations is therefore critical, not only to promote equality but also to safeguard the sector's future.

This report assesses the state of diversity and inclusion in UK manufacturing in 2024. It highlights the importance of leadership in shaping workplace culture and examines the key attributes of inclusive leadership. It is structured as follows:

- **Section 1** reviews the changes in women's participation in UK manufacturing over the past year, offering insights across occupations, industries, ethnicity, and disability.
- **Section 2** presents findings from an online survey and a series of interviews, which explored leadership qualities that support diversity, inclusion, and equality in the workplace.
- **Section 3** outlines guiding principles for inclusive leadership.
- **Section 4** concludes with a call to action, inviting manufacturing leaders to work collectively to advance gender equality and strengthen the sector's future.
- **Appendix A** provides guidelines for organising inclusive events, developed in response to a request from the WiM community.

⁷ UK Government (2025). *Advanced Manufacturing Sector Plan*. The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy.

⁸ ONS (2025). Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2024. 2nd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 9354, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9354-2>

1. Annual review: state of diversity and inclusion in UK manufacturing in 2024

The share of women in the manufacturing workforce rises to 28.4% in 2024

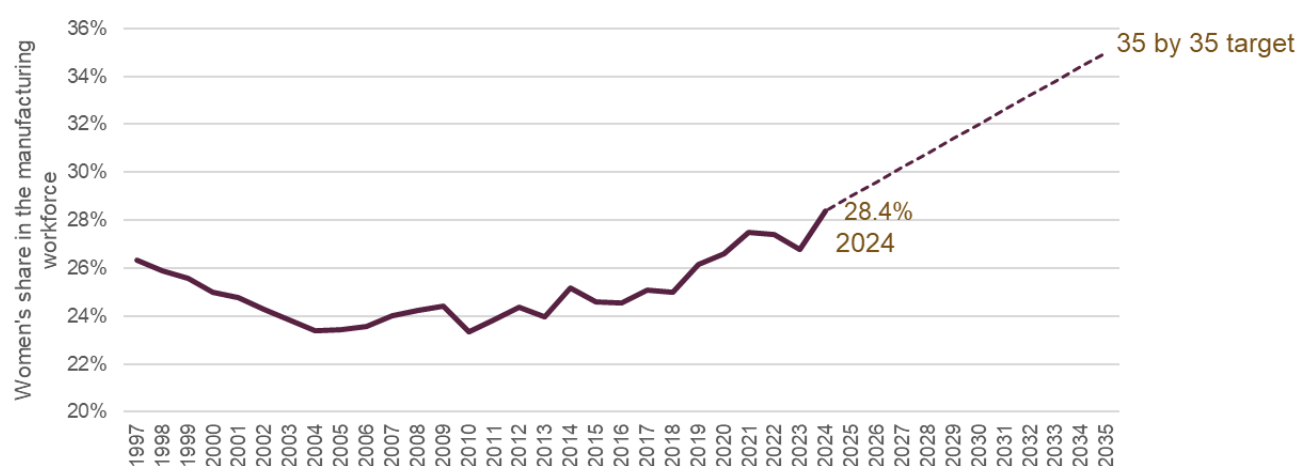
Women's representation in the manufacturing workforce reached 28.4% in 2024, an increase of 1.6 percentage points from the 26.8% level seen in 2023. However, manufacturing remains among the sectors with the lowest participation of women. In contrast, sectors such as health and social work and education where women represent more than half of the workforce.⁹

This progress indicates movement towards the government's "35 by 35" target, embedded in the Advanced Manufacturing Sector Plan and supported by the Women in Manufacturing (WiM) UK initiative, aiming to increase women's share of the workforce to 35% by 2035.

These figures should, however, be interpreted with caution. Our review of different data series revealed some variation in the reported levels of women's participation in manufacturing, reflecting differences in methodology and coverage. The measure presented here aligns most closely with the International Labour Organization (ILO) data, which provides greater consistency and facilitates international comparisons.

Nonetheless, increasing the participation of women and younger populations is critical, given that nearly one-quarter of the manufacturing workforce will reach retirement age within the next decade. This represents more than 600,000 people, 74% of whom are men.¹⁰

FIGURE 1. SHARE OF WOMEN IN UK MANUFACTURING WORKFORCE, 2023



Note: Data includes employees and self-employed persons. Figures are based on annual averages of quarterly data.

Source: Office for National Statistics (2025). EMP14: Employees and self-employed by industry.

⁹ ONS (2025). EMP14: Employees and self-employed by industry.

¹⁰ ONS (2025). Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2024. 2nd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 9354, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9354-2>

Women continue to gain ground in manufacturing leadership

In 2024 progress was made in women's participation in some of the most male-dominated occupations within manufacturing. With the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic period,¹¹ women's participation in manager, director, and senior positions showed sustained improvement, reaching 24.8% in 2024, an increase of one percentage point from 2023 (Figure 2).

After the decline in 2023, women's representation in professional occupations, including engineering, improved in 2024. It rose by 3.1 percentage points to 27.2% in professional roles, and by 3.6 points to 36.2% in associate professional and technical roles.

But women's participation in skilled trades and in plant, process, and machine operative roles remains low. Just over one in five skilled tradespeople and fewer than one in ten machine operatives are women. Both occupations recorded declines compared to 2023, with a relatively small reduction among plant, process, and machine operatives (0.2 percentage points) but a larger decrease in skilled trades (1.7 percentage points).¹²

Improving gender balance in skilled trades and in plant, process, and machine operative roles is important because entry-level positions often provide accessible pathways into the manufacturing sector and support social mobility.¹³

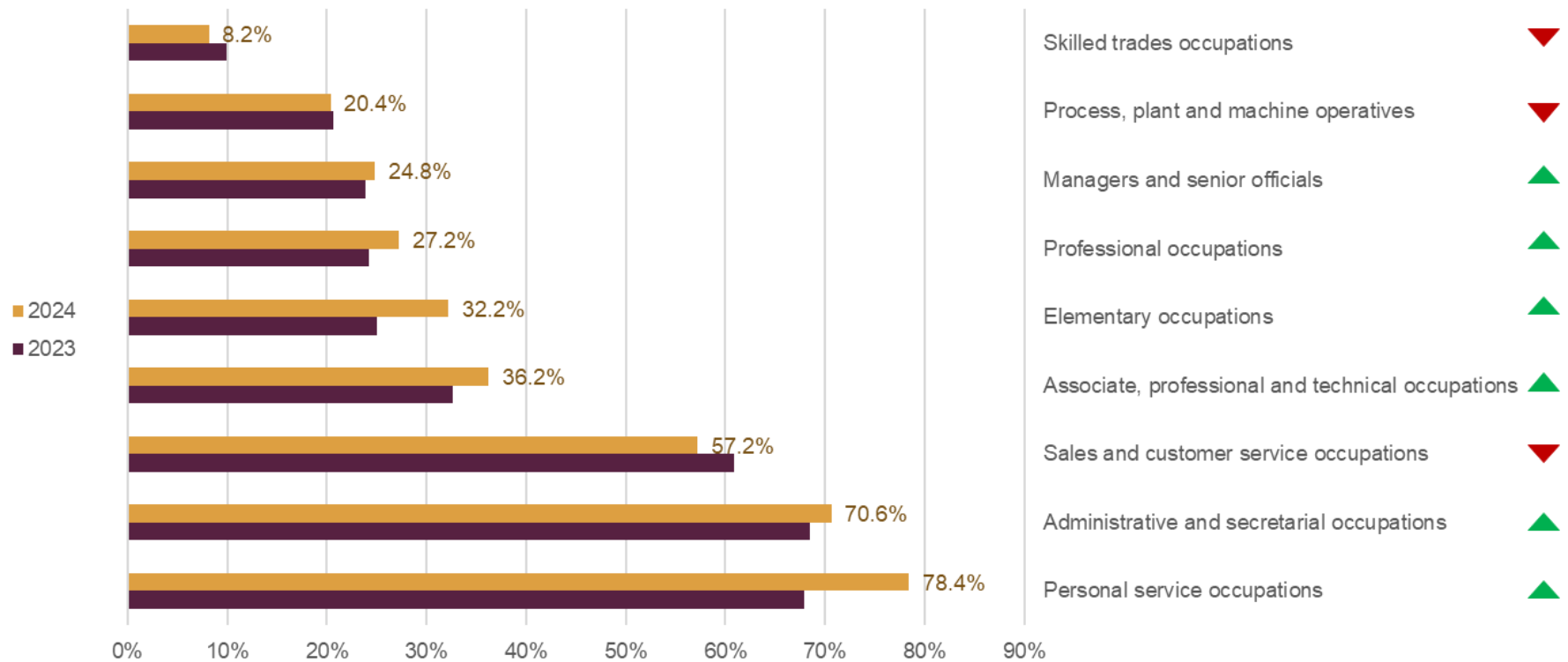


¹¹ Castañeda-Navarrete, J. (2023). *Women in manufacturing: the case for a gender-transformative digitalisation*. An InterAct funded policy brief. Cambridge Industrial Innovation Policy. University of Cambridge.

¹² ONS (2025). Annual population survey. Workplace analysis. These occupations are based on ONS Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2020.

¹³ Xu, X. (2023). *The changing geography of jobs*. Institute for Fiscal Studies.

FIGURE 2. SHARE OF WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING BY OCCUPATION, 2023 AND 2024



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025). Annual population survey. Workplace analysis. Occupations based on [ONS Standard Occupational Classification \(SOC\) 2020](#).



But women remain under-represented among business owners. In 2023 women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises accounted for just 13% of all manufacturing businesses.¹⁴ **Box 1** presents the journey of Neo Chatyoka, CEO and founder of Uhuru Botanicals, and highlights the role of networks and targeted funding programmes in supporting the emergence of new manufacturers.

Women from non-White backgrounds made progress in their representation in UK manufacturing in 2024

In 2024, 13.5% of women working in manufacturing were from a non-White ethnic group, a proportion slightly below the average among those employed at 15.9% in 2024. This represents a marked increase from 9.6% in 2023 (**Figure 3**).¹⁵ Women from Indian, Black and “other Asian” backgrounds recorded the largest gains.

¹⁴ ONS (2024). Longitudinal Small Business Survey tables by Nation, Business size and Sector (2023).

¹⁵ ONS (2025). Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2024. 2nd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 9354, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9354-2>

BOX 1. UHURU BOTANICALS: CHAMPIONING INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY IN SKINCARE AND BEYOND



Neo Chatyoka is the CEO and founder of Uhuru Botanicals. A UK-based skincare and cosmetics company, specialising in organic, vegan, and ethically produced formulations designed for diverse skin types, rooted in values of inclusivity and representation, Uhuru Botanicals combines traditional beauty knowledge with innovation, including the integration of AI tools and formulation training to empower women and young people in manufacturing.

Neo's journey into manufacturing began in 2017 from a deeply personal need. Seeking a remedy for her daughter's eczema, she experimented with natural ingredients and created a balm that proved effective. What started as a solution for her family soon evolved into a business idea. Recognising the absence of skincare products tailored to Black and ethnic minority skin types in mainstream markets, and determined to address this gap, she established Uhuru Botanicals.

The making of a manufacturer

Initially producing from her kitchen, Neo later moved to her garage as demand grew. Her transition into formal manufacturing came unexpectedly when she secured shared workshop space, which enabled her to scale operations. At that moment, she recognised she was a manufacturer. This shift in perspective encouraged her to seek out networks and communities of women in manufacturing, where she realised representation and visibility were essential for inspiring others.

Neo's involvement in the first Women in Manufacturing (WiM) Conference was a turning point. Introduced to this network by Megan Ronayne, Neo found a sense of belonging among other women working in a male-dominated industry. This experience encouraged her to join the first WiM Industrial Advisory Board, where she could advocate for greater women's participation and representation.

I certainly felt like I belonged. I was like, oh gosh, there are so many other women in manufacturing. (...) We've got a role (...) there are other women who have the same interest as me, who are also trying to build their identity within this manufacturing industry.

Her innovative approach extended into technology. With support from an Innovate UK award targeting under-represented entrepreneurs, Neo developed an AI tool to teach people how to formulate their own cosmetic products. She also established a formulation lab and expanded her factory space.

Today, Uhuru Botanicals produces both its own brand and products for other businesses. Neo sees her role as more than entrepreneurial: she considers it an act of representation and advocacy for women, particularly Black women, within the manufacturing sector.

(continued on the next page)

Promoting inclusive leadership

Neo's leadership philosophy is rooted in inclusivity, accessibility, and representation. For her, inclusive leadership means ensuring that opportunities, mentorship, and resources are available to everyone, particularly those from under-represented backgrounds. She emphasises that "you cannot be what you cannot see", underscoring the importance of visible role models in manufacturing.

Her approach to leadership within her own company reflects these principles. She builds an environment of mutual respect with her collaborators. And she prioritises clear communication, active listening, and adaptability to individual needs. For instance, she introduced flexible working arrangements to accommodate an employee managing health-related challenges.



Neo Chatyoka, CEO and founder of Uhuru Botanicals

Representation is not limited to her personal achievements. Neo's AI tool and formulation workshops have already inspired students to develop and sell their own products, demonstrating the positive effect of inclusive practices. She also notes the personal impact on her children, who now perceive entrepreneurship and manufacturing as natural career pathways.

Neo stresses that barriers to inclusion remain, and the need to share information about the possibilities of manufacturing among under-represented communities. She highlights the persistence of tokenism in recruitment, where numerical diversity targets are met without meaningful inclusion. To counter this, she argues for mentoring, training, and long-term support mechanisms that genuinely enable under-represented individuals to succeed in manufacturing careers.

Future steps in Neo's journey

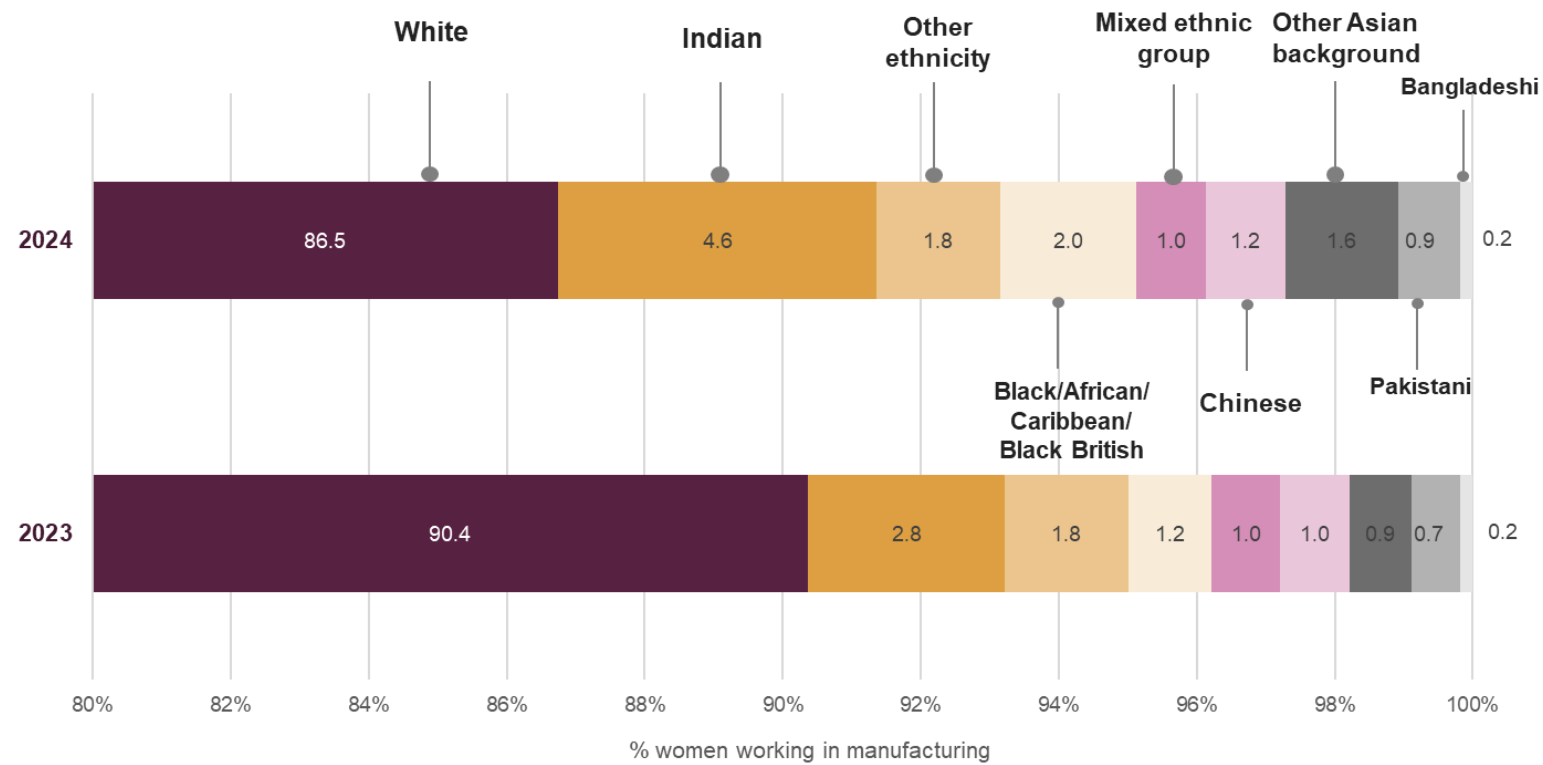
Looking ahead, Neo remains committed to strengthening the manufacturing side of the business. Her ambition is to see Uhuru Botanicals grow into a global enterprise over the next 5 years, expanding its reach by manufacturing a wide range of products for diverse markets.

Neo's journey illustrates how inclusive leadership is not just about opening doors but about actively creating conditions where people from diverse backgrounds can thrive. By combining innovation with advocacy, she has developed a model of leadership that blends entrepreneurship, representation, and social impact.

Through Uhuru Botanicals and her wider advocacy, Neo continues to expand the possibilities of who belongs in manufacturing and how the sector can grow stronger through inclusion.

Source: <https://uhurubotanicals.co.uk> and interview with Neo Chatyoka, CEO and founder of Uhuru Botanicals.

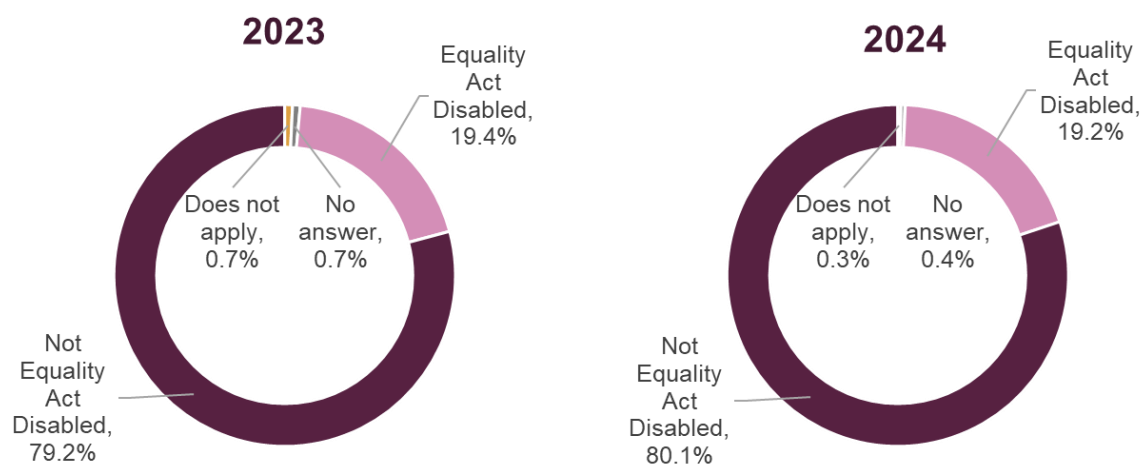
FIGURE 3. WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING BY ETHNIC GROUP, 2023 AND 2024



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025). Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2024. 2nd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 9354, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9354-2>

Just 54% of disabled women are employed compared with nearly 80% of non-disabled women.¹⁶ While some disabled women may not be able to work, insights from both the survey and interviews conducted for this report highlighted that flexible work arrangements could boost employment participation. In 2024 disabled women, as defined in the Equality Act 2010, represented 6.0% of the overall manufacturing workforce and 19.2% of the women in the sector, a proportion slightly below the average among those employed (21.5%) in 2024. This represents an improvement on their overall representation in 2023, when the participation of disabled women stood at 4.7% of the manufacturing workforce, and a steady representation among women (**Figure 4**).

FIGURE 4. WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING BY DISABILITY, 2023 AND 2024



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025). Annual Population Survey, January–December, 2024. 2nd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 9354, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9354-2>

Traditional gendered division of labour persists across UK manufacturing industries

In manufacturing the lowest representation of women in 2024 was found in: wood and cork products (12.7%), basic metals (14.1%), motor vehicles, trailers, and semi-trailers (15.5%), other transport equipment (15.9%), and machinery and equipment (18.3%). In contrast, industries with near-equal gender participation include: wearing apparel (64.9%), leather and related products (51.9%), textiles (44.3%), pharmaceuticals (42.2%), and food products (37.2%) (**Table 1**).¹⁷

¹⁶ Powell, A. (2024). *Disabled people in employment*.

¹⁷ ONS (2025). JOBS03 Employee jobs by industry (UK totals) and JOBS04 Self Employed jobs by industry (UK totals). Figures correspond to the annual average of the sum of employee and self-employed jobs.

TABLE 1. REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN BY MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY, 2023–2024

Manufacturing industry	2023	2024	Change 2023–2024
Wearing apparel	64.2%	64.9%	0.7
Leather and related products	51.9%	51.9%	0.0
Textiles	43.1%	44.3%	1.2
Basic pharmaceutical products	40.4%	42.2%	1.8
Other manufacturing	41.8%	38.2%	-3.6
Food products	37.8%	37.2%	-0.6
Printing and reproduction of recorded media	31.2%	36.0%	4.8
Chemicals and chemical products	31.6%	33.9%	2.3
Beverages and tobacco	29.6%	30.9%	1.3
Electrical equipment	28.1%	27.3%	-0.8
Furniture	23.4%	25.9%	2.5
Computer, electronic and optical products	26.6%	25.5%	-1.1
Paper and paper products	22.4%	23.1%	0.7
Rubber and plastic products	19.9%	22.9%	3.0
Other non-metallic mineral products	23.7%	22.6%	-1.1
Coke and refined petroleum products	21.4%	18.6%	-2.8
Fabricated metal products	17.7%	18.6%	0.9
Machinery and equipment	17.7%	18.3%	0.6
Repair and installation of machinery and equipment	18.4%	16.7%	-1.8
Other transport equipment	15.2%	15.9%	0.7
Motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers	14.9%	15.5%	0.6
Basic metals	14.6%	14.1%	-0.5
Wood and wood and cork products	12.9%	12.7%	-0.1

Note: Figures correspond to the annual average of the sum of employee and self-employed jobs.

Source: ONS (2025). JOBS03 Employee jobs by industry (UK totals) and JOBS04 Self-Employed jobs by industry (UK totals).

Differences between men and women in part-time work reflect the ongoing imbalance in unpaid work

In March 2024 women in the UK spent 47% more time than men on unpaid childcare, adult care, and household work.¹⁸ This traditional gender-based division of unpaid work makes women more likely to work part-time than men. In 2024, 23.5% of the women in manufacturing worked part-time, compared with just 6.1% of men. This represents a 1.1-percentage-point decrease from 2023, when 24.6% of women in manufacturing worked part-time.¹⁹

¹⁸ ONS (2025). Online Time-Use Survey (OTUS). March 2024.

¹⁹ ONS (2025). Workforce jobs by industry (SIC 2007) and sex – unadjusted (annual average of quarterly figures).

The gender pay gap continues to narrow, but women still earn 14.9% less than men

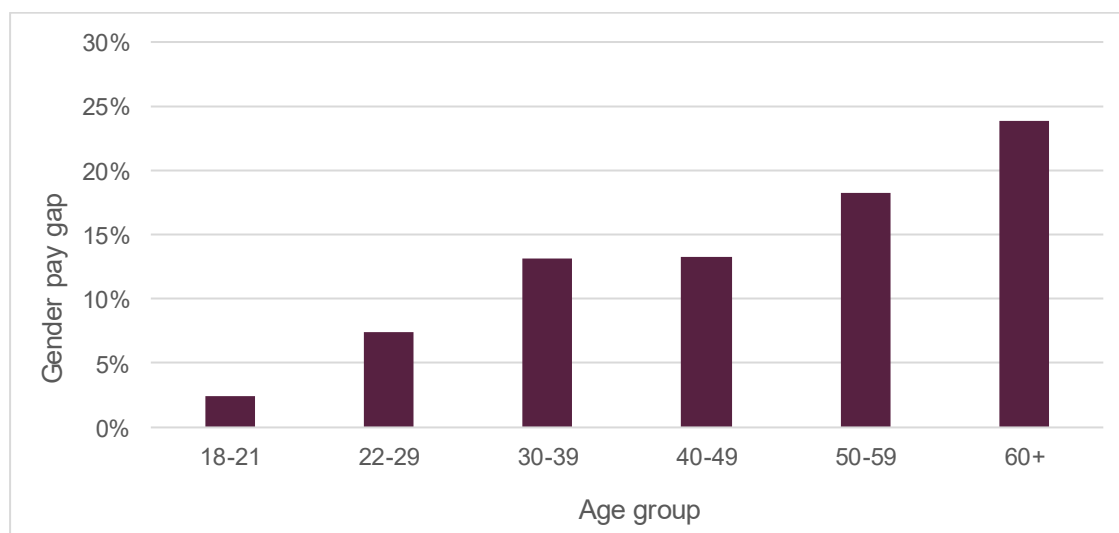
In 2024 women in the manufacturing sector earned 14.9% less than men.²⁰ This is the second year in which we have seen a reduction in the gender pay gap, falling from 16.7% in 2022 to 15.9% in 2023. Despite this improvement, the sector still lags almost 2% behind the national average, which is 13.1%.

In 2023 the gender pay gap among full-time manufacturing workers was 13.4%. This fell to 11.4% in 2024 but remained higher than the 7.0% seen across all sectors. Similarly, for part-time workers in manufacturing, the gap closed to 5.3%, down from 5.9% in 2023, but still below the -3.1% across all sectors, where women were on average paid more than men.²¹

The gender pay gap in manufacturing widens with age. Among all employees, the gap is lowest for women aged 18–21, at 2.4%. Within this age group, women in full-time employment earn, on average, 1.4% more than their male counterparts, outperforming the median across all sectors, where women aged 18–21 in full-time work earn just 0.5% more than men. But this advantage is short-lived. The gender pay gap increases markedly with age, and among all employees in their 60s, men earn more than one-fifth more than women, on average (**Figure 5**).²²

By occupation, the largest gender pay gaps (where data is available) are in: sales occupations (20.6%); skilled trade occupations (19.6%); business and public service associate professionals (18.9%); science, engineering, and technology associate professionals (17.7%); and textiles, printing, and other skilled trades (12.5%).²³

FIGURE 5. GENDER PAY GAP BY AGE GROUP, 2024 (ALL EMPLOYEES)



Source: Office for National Statistics (2025). Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings.

²⁰ Difference between average hourly earnings (excluding overtime) of men and women as a proportion of men's average hourly earnings (excluding overtime), based on median values.

²¹ ONS (2025). Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings.

²² Ibid.

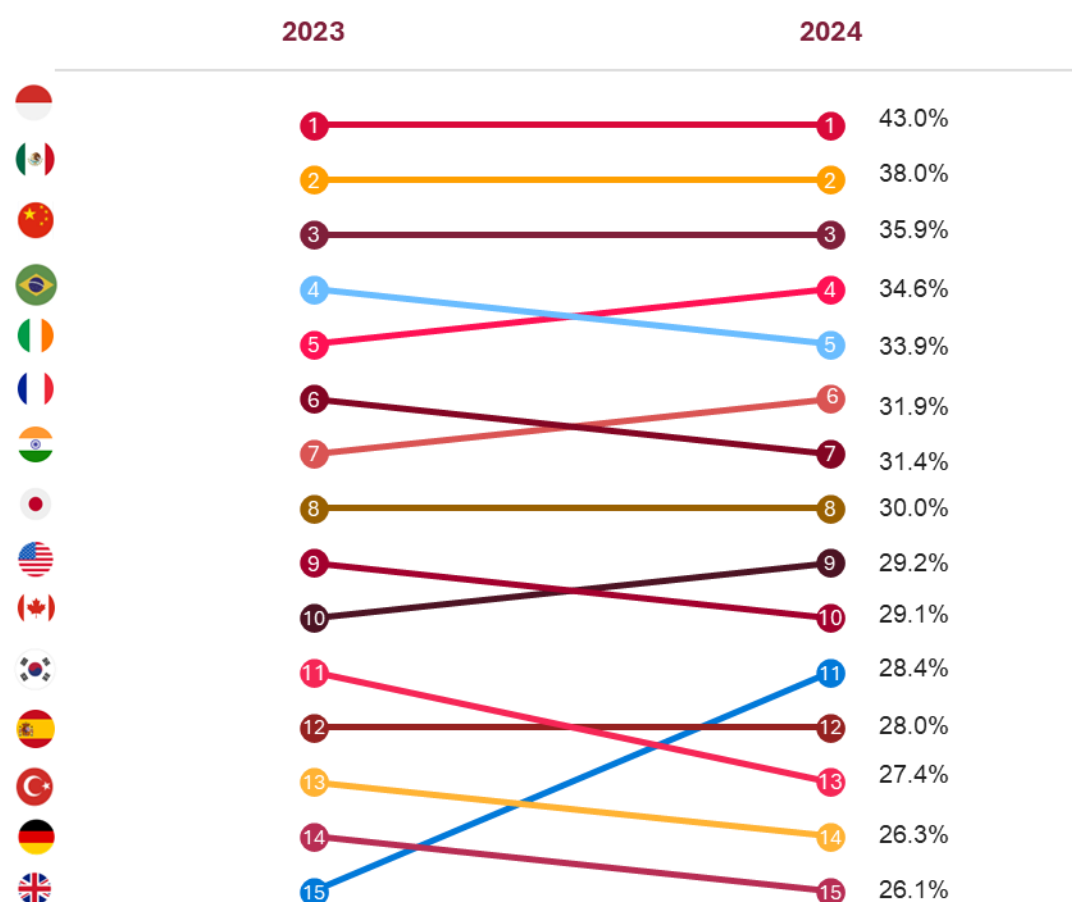
²³ Ibid.

UK advances among leading manufacturing nations in women's representation

Among the world's leading manufacturing nations, women's representation continues to vary significantly. In 2024 Indonesia, Mexico, and China remained at the top, with women accounting for 43%, 38%, and 35.9% of the manufacturing workforce, respectively. Ireland advanced to fourth place with 34.6%, overtaking Brazil, which slipped to fifth at 33.9%.

The UK improved significantly, rising from 15th to 11th place. Women's representation in UK manufacturing reached 28.4% in 2024, surpassing Germany, Spain, and Türkiye. This stands in contrast to the small decreases recorded in countries such as Brazil, Germany, and Türkiye.

FIGURE 6. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING IN TOP MANUFACTURING COUNTRIES, 2023 AND 2024



Note: Data for China is based on 2022 and 2023 figures, as it is the most recent data available.

Source: Authors, based on the ILO (2025). ILOSTAT explorer. Employment by sex and economic activity; National Bureau of Statistics of China (2025). *China Population and Employment Statistics Yearbook 2023. Employed Persons at Year-end in Urban Units Excluding Private Units by Sector*; Office for National Statistics (2025). EMP14: Employees and self-employed by industry.

2. Inclusive leadership: perspectives from employees and leaders

This section draws on evidence collected in 2025 to examine leadership qualities that foster diversity, inclusion, and equality in the manufacturing sector. The evidence includes an online survey conducted between May and June 2025, which provided a broad overview of perceptions and practices across the sector, and 14 interviews conducted between June and September 2025, which offered deeper insights into the lived experiences of people working in manufacturing, including those in leadership positions.

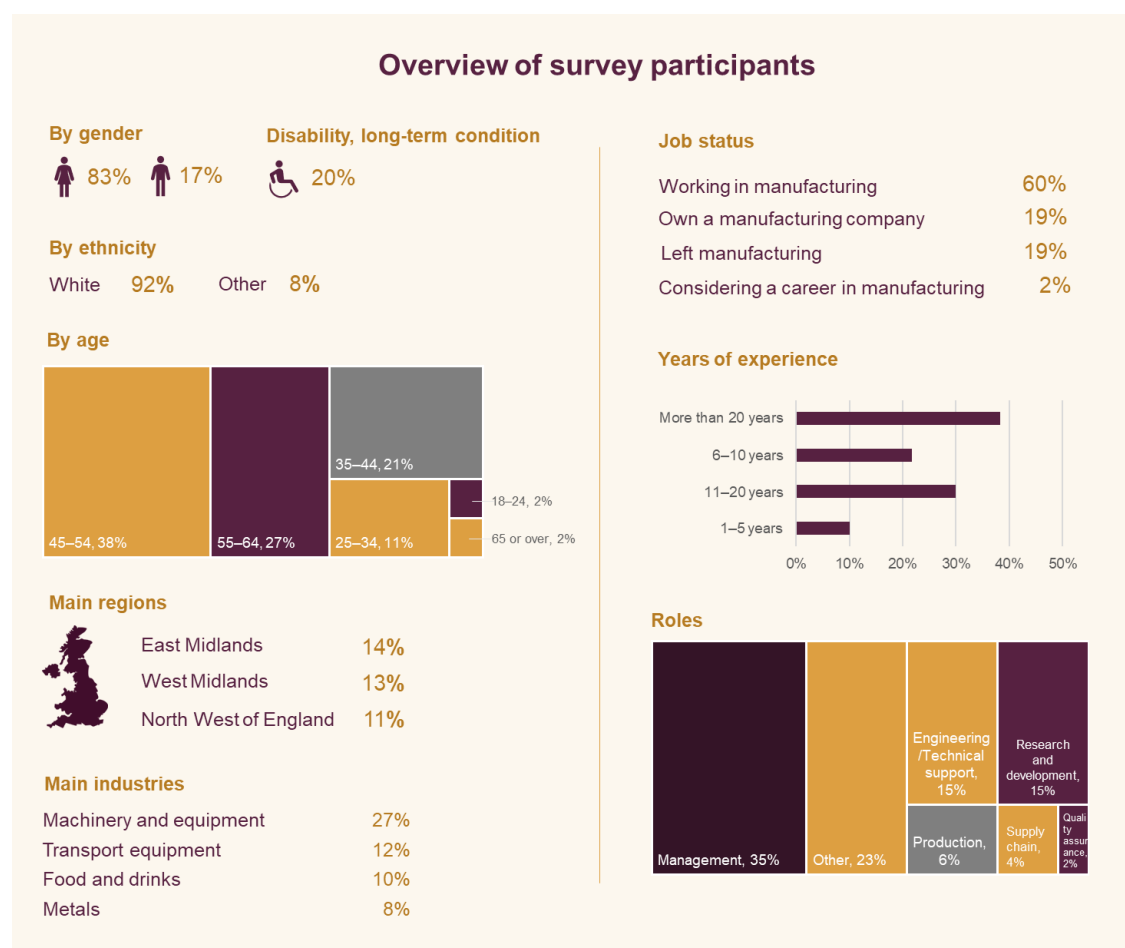
A total of 63 individuals completed the survey. The survey respondents represented a diverse group of individuals working in or connected to the manufacturing sector, with a majority identifying as women (83%) and 17% as men. None of them identified with another gender or preferred not to disclose this information. A substantial proportion (20%) reported having a disability, long-term health condition, or neurodivergence. In terms of ethnicity, the participants were predominantly White, accounting for 92% of responses.

In terms of age, the largest group was those aged 45–54, making up 38% of the sample, followed by those aged 55–64 at 27%, and 35–44 at 21%. Almost half of the respondents (45%) had over twenty years of experience in manufacturing, with 25% reporting 11–20 years, and 20% having worked for 6–10 years. Only 10% had been in the industry for 1–5 years, further indicating that mid- to late-career professionals formed the core of the survey population.

In terms of roles, the most commonly held positions were in management, which made up 35% of the sample. This was followed by a broad category of other roles, including areas such as marketing and finance (23%), as well as engineering or technical support and research and development, each at 15%. Smaller proportions of the respondents worked in production (6%), supply chains (4%), and quality assurance (2%).

Geographically, the East Midlands accounted for the highest concentration of participants, at 14%, closely followed by the West Midlands at 13%, and the North West of England at 11%. The industries represented were primarily machinery and equipment, which accounted for 27% of respondents, followed by transport equipment (12%), food and drinks (10%), and metals (8%) (**Figure 7**).

FIGURE 7. OVERVIEW OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



Note: Number of observations = 63.

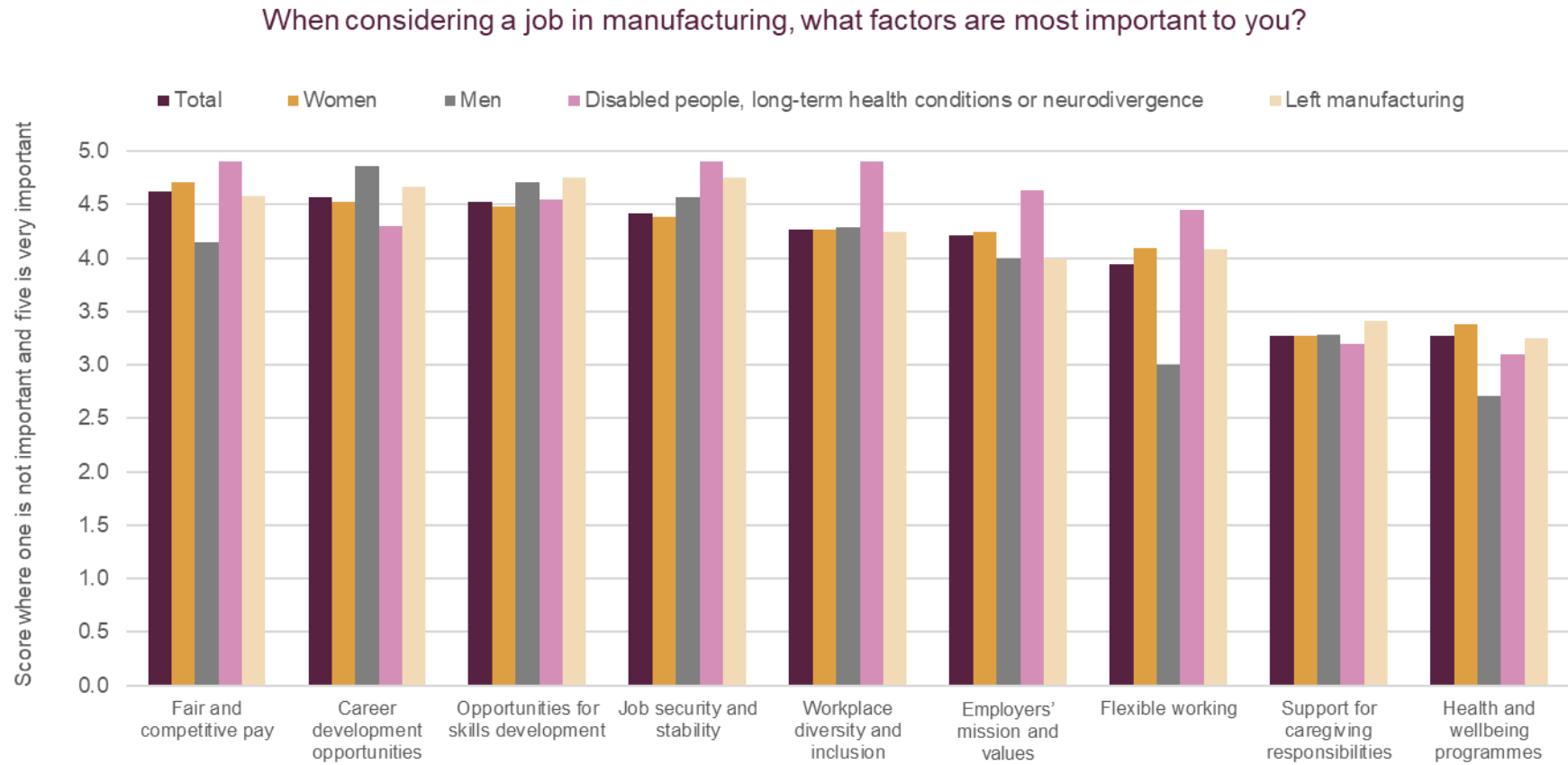
Source: Women in Manufacturing (2025). Shaping an inclusive manufacturing sector survey.

We asked people what factors were most important when considering a job in manufacturing. Across all groups, fair and competitive pay, career development opportunities, opportunities for skills development, job security, and diversity and inclusion ranked highest. Disabled people, and people with long-term health conditions or neurodivergence, consistently rated most factors as more important than other groups, particularly workplace diversity and inclusion, job security and stability, employers’ values, and flexible working (**Figure 8**).

Interview participants also highlighted the unconscious bias that still affects women’s career development and progression. A research participant revealed that she only reached a managerial role after roughly thirty years in the industry, and she felt that male peers were assumed to be more capable. A former head of engineering told her she was “not the right sort of person” to be a manager; she internalised this until a supportive manager challenged her assumption and became an ally. Her experience echoes wider evidence that women take longer to progress in manufacturing and often face micro-aggressions.²⁴

²⁴ See for example: Kim, J.Y. and Meister, A. (2023). *Microaggressions, Interrupted: The Experience and Effects of Gender Microaggressions for Women in STEM*. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 185, 513–531; Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2023). *Advancing women in manufacturing*. Washington, DC.

FIGURE 8. FAIR AND COMPETITIVE PAY AND FLEXIBLE WORKING ARE MORE IMPORTANT FOR WOMEN, DISABLED PEOPLE, PEOPLE WITH LONG-TERM CONDITIONS AND NEURODIVERGENCE, AND THOSE WHO HAVE LEFT MANUFACTURING



Note: Number of observations = 48.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2025). Shaping an inclusive manufacturing sector survey.



Interestingly, men placed less importance on flexible working, health and wellbeing programmes, and fair and competitive pay than women, disabled people, and people with long-term health conditions or neurodivergence. In contrast, men placed more emphasis on career and skills development opportunities. These findings align with those of previous research highlighting the importance of flexible arrangements to attract and retain under-represented groups into manufacturing.²⁵ Statistics also indicate that manufacturing lags behind other industries in providing flexible working arrangements. The data, however, tend to focus on hybrid models rather than on broader forms of flexibility.²⁶

In terms of specific practices considered important to foster an inclusive manufacturing workplace, transparent communication, clear career pathways, and flexible work arrangements were rated highest overall across respondents. Disabled people and people with long-term health conditions or neurodiversity placed greater importance on accessible facilities, inclusive design of technology and equipment, diversity and inclusion policies, and employee resource groups. Meanwhile, those who had left the manufacturing sector rated clear career pathways the highest (**Figure 9**).

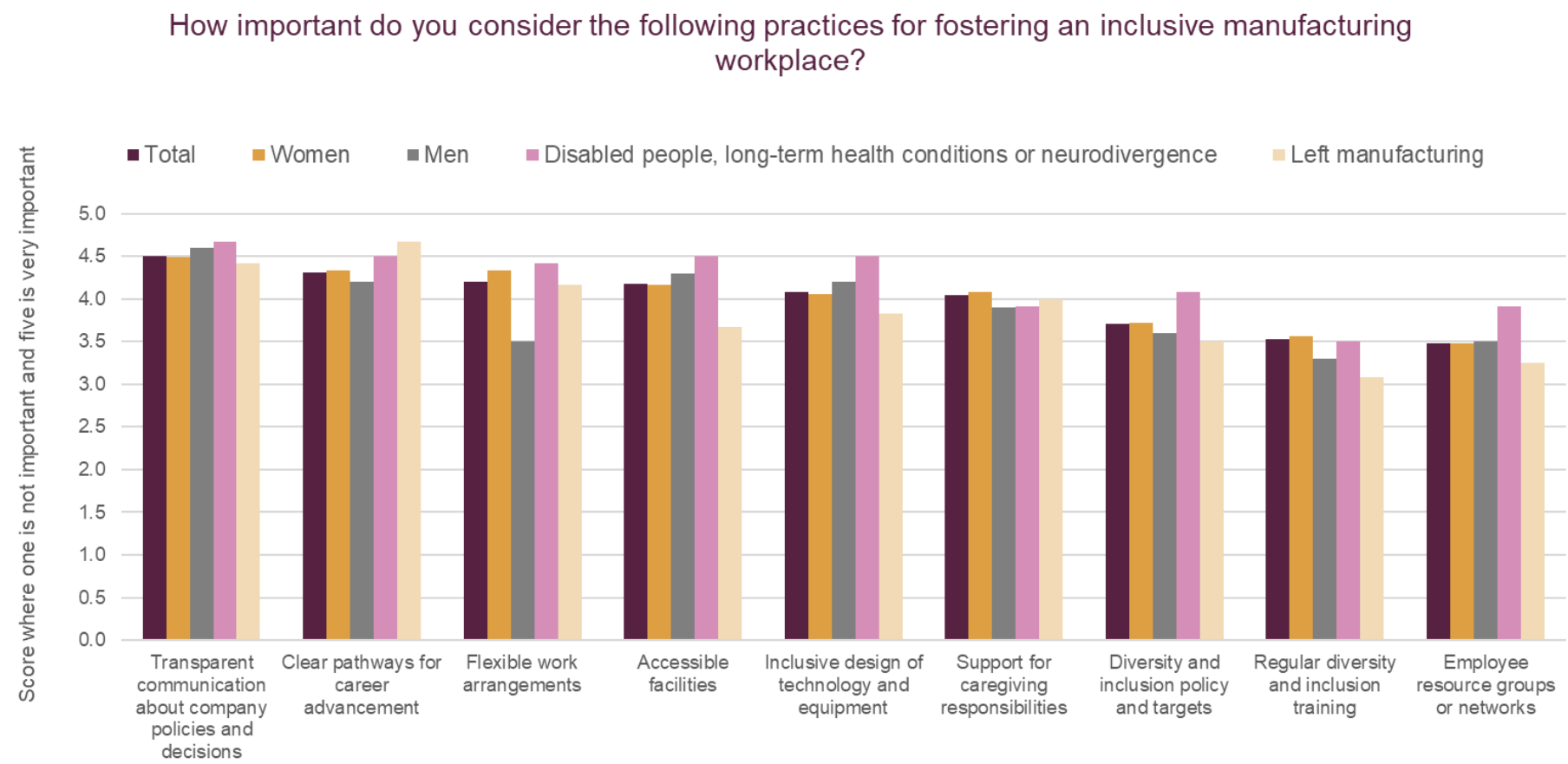
Be accessible in terms of all types of disabilities by providing flexible hours and breaks, quiet areas, written communication and allowing self-directed work.

Survey participant

²⁵ Stewart, R. et al. (2023). *'Making Things Work' Public Opinion of UK Manufacturing 2023*.

²⁶ ONS (2024). *Business Insights and Conditions Survey*.

FIGURE 9. CLEAR PATHWAYS FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT IS HIGHLIGHTED AS AN IMPORTANT PRACTICE, PARTICULARLY AMONG DISABLED PEOPLE, PEOPLE WITH LONG-TERM CONDITIONS AND NEURODIVERGENCE, AND THOSE WHO HAVE LEFT MANUFACTURING



Note: Number of observations = 61.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2025). Shaping an inclusive manufacturing sector survey.

FIGURE 10. OPEN AND TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION IS THE MOST VALUED LEADERSHIP QUALITY



Note: Number of observations = 61.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2025). Shaping an inclusive manufacturing sector survey.

In terms of leadership qualities, open and transparent communication was the most valued quality across all groups. No clear differences were seen in the type of qualities most valued by women and men. However, disabled people, people with long-term conditions or neurodivergence, and those who had left manufacturing rated recognising and valuing contributions higher (**Figure 10**). Other qualities highlighted included integrity, exemplifying good values, and technical competence.

Box 2 presents how Fran Ball, Senior Vice President of UK Supply Chain at Arla Foods UK, places communication at the centre of her approach to inclusion. Under her leadership, Arla has introduced frontline listening groups, especially in production and logistics, to better understand what helps women thrive and what drives them away.

You have to talk about it regularly – understand people's experiences and how they felt as a result – good and bad – and then look to adjust behaviour by agreeing as a group to hold ourselves to account – 'hi guys' is no longer acceptable, even though many saw this as gender-neutral – small steps to a different place.

Survey participant



BOX 2. ARLA FOODS: EMPOWERING INCLUSIVE LEADERS



Arla Foods is the UK's largest dairy cooperative and one of the leading food companies in the country, with well-known brands including Lurpak, Arla Cravendale, and Arla Protein.

People are at the heart of Arla's operations. With over 2,800 colleagues across multiple sites in the UK, the business has made notable progress in gender representation at senior levels: 47% of all manager and director roles are held by women; 30% of the UK Leadership Team are women; and 44% of participants in Arla's Talent Programme are women, building a strong pipeline of future leaders.

Building an inclusive culture

Over the past 4 years, Arla has been developing a gender diversity strategy aimed at increasing the representation of women across the organisation, particularly in manufacturing and logistics roles.

The strategy is structured around three key workstreams:

- **Attract.** Arla aims to increase the percentage of women applicants in the UK supply chain from 15% to 27% by 2030. To support this goal, the company is fostering an inclusive culture where individuals of all genders feel encouraged to apply for a role within a supply chain. Key initiatives in this area include: using the "Gender Decoder" tool for all job adverts, ensuring inclusive recruitment panels, delivering inclusive hiring training for managers, and showcasing women working in Arla's supply chain, both internally and externally.
- **Develop.** To strengthen its pipeline of future women leaders, Arla actively supports the career development of employees through coaching and mentorship opportunities and empowering leaders to champion inclusion.
- **Retain.** Arla recognises that gender diversity depends on both attraction and retention. Efforts in this area include: improving facilities and uniforms for women in supply chain roles; introducing progressive policies such as maternity leave, menopause support, shared parental leave, pregnancy loss support, fertility treatment leave, and formal flexible working options. As a result of these efforts, the percentage of women leaving the organisation has declined for the first time – dropping from 19% to 11% in the past 12 months. Arla remains committed to reducing this figure and creating a more inclusive and equitable workplace for all.

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Photo: Fran Ball

Fran Ball, a manufacturing role model leading by example

Fran Ball, Senior Vice President of UK Supply Chain at Arla Foods UK, brings decades of experience in manufacturing to her leadership role, and a deep, personal commitment to inclusion, overseeing all UK supply chain locations, and more than 2,800 colleagues across the country.

Throughout her time at Arla, Fran has been instrumental in shaping a more inclusive culture across the organisation's supply chain, driving initiatives that improve representation, break down barriers, and ensure that all colleagues feel they belong.

Fran's journey into manufacturing began early, inspired by her father, an engineer. "I was always curious about how things worked and why," she recalls. She went on to study manufacturing engineering at the University of Cambridge, entering a field where women were a clear minority. "I was often the only woman in the room," she says, a reality that shaped both her resilience and her drive to make the path easier for others.

At the heart of Fran's leadership style is visibility and authenticity. She speaks openly about the importance of role modelling, particularly for women early in their careers who need to see what's possible. "You can't be what you can't see," she notes, explaining why she makes a point of being visible, both internally and externally.

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For Fran, inclusive leadership means creating a culture where colleagues feel empowered to bring their whole selves to work, without putting on a different face to fit in.

One of the ways she leads by example is through what she calls “leaving loudly”, a phrase she heard another woman leader use and adopted for herself, taking visible actions that demonstrate that work–life balance is both acceptable and respected. Whether it’s answering a call from a child’s school or leaving on time for personal commitments, Fran knows that leaders set the tone. “People follow what they see, not what you say,” she explains, recounting how one colleague’s decision to leave on time (rather than late), where possible, encouraged his entire team to do the same.

Fran’s approach to inclusion is also firmly grounded in listening. Under her leadership, Arla has introduced frontline listening groups, especially in production and logistics, to better understand what helps women thrive and what drives them away. These conversations led to simple but impactful changes: seeking better-fitting uniforms, hairdryers and mirrors in changing rooms, and developing consistent facilities across all sites, not just at head office. These tangible actions, based on direct feedback, have contributed to a marked improvement in retention among women in supply chain roles.

Critically, Fran emphasises that gender inclusion at Arla is not about excluding anyone else. “We’re creating environments where everyone can thrive,” she says, noting that inclusion benefits the entire workforce. Alongside targeted programmes to attract, retain, and develop women, Arla fosters a broader culture of belonging.

Looking ahead, Fran identifies flexible working in manufacturing as a major area for progress and a necessary step for attracting and retaining a more diverse workforce. As she puts it, “We haven’t yet figured out how to match traditional shift patterns with modern-day needs and expectations, but we have to.”

Through her inclusive leadership, Fran is helping to redefine what it means to lead in manufacturing – not just for women, but for everyone.

Source: Interview with Fran Ball, Senior Vice President of UK Supply Chain at Arla Foods UK and information provided by Arla Foods.

In contrast, feeling undervalued was one of the main reasons individuals cited for having left manufacturing, highlighted by 75% of participants. Other reasons mentioned include: a lack of career progression (58%), a non-inclusive work environment (42%), and work–life balance challenges (33%). Worryingly, both survey and interview participants highlighted the persistence of behaviours such as misogyny, ageism, racism, abusive language, and harassment.

Box 3 presents the experience of an automotive engineer who, despite having built a successful career, decided to resign from her role after feeling undervalued and unsupported while experiencing health issues.

BOX 3. WHY I LEFT MANUFACTURING: AN ENGINEER'S PERSPECTIVE

After nearly four decades in the automotive manufacturing sector, a senior engineer decided to step away from a career she had once considered a vocation. Beginning her journey in 1988, she entered a workplace culture where women were often confined to administrative roles and rarely recognised as engineers. Her first experiences reflected this reality: questions about who cared for her children while she travelled for work, assumptions that her promotions were due to quotas rather than competence, and the frequent experience of having her authority undermined in meetings.

Despite these barriers, she built a successful career, supported at times by inclusive managers who recognised her ability and championed her. Over the years, she rose through the ranks, gained international experience, and managed diverse teams. She became a role model for her daughters, both of whom pursued engineering and supply chain careers.

Barriers that persist

Maternity and part-time work policies, particularly in earlier decades, placed undue pressure on working mothers. Returning from leave meant being treated as less committed, while flexible working was more theoretical than practical, with expectations to maintain a full workload in fewer hours. Over time, dismissive attitudes left her and many other women feeling like “token” presences in a male-dominated environment.

Maternity leave was 16 weeks and then you had to go back full-time. There were no concessions at all – I was still pushing car bodies around the shop floor at 30 weeks pregnant.

When I had my second daughter, I could return part-time, 3 days per week, but the working day just expanded to cover the full week's work. The expectation was, well, it's your job, so you have to fit it all in.

Later in her career, the absence of meaningful support for the menopause became a decisive factor. Despite corporate seminars and awareness campaigns, she found her manager dismissive when she raised concerns, telling her not to “make a fuss”.

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Without psychological safety or genuine empathy from leadership, she felt unable to continue. The final trigger for her resignation came when major achievements by her team were downplayed and minimised, reflecting a lack of recognition that compounded years of undervaluation.

After 37 years, I finally resigned. The complete lack of support during menopause, combined with constant minimising of my achievements, made it impossible to stay.

Lessons for the sector

Her story illustrates the long shadow cast by workplace cultures that resist change. Diversity initiatives, she argues, are meaningless unless matched by genuine inclusion – policies, behaviours, and leadership practices that recognise and adapt to employees' needs. While she has since chosen to pursue her career independently, she remains convinced that manufacturing can be a rewarding career for women.

Her departure is both a personal decision and a warning to the sector: without cultural change, manufacturing risks losing experienced talent at the very moment it most needs diverse perspectives to innovate and thrive.

Source: Interview with an anonymised woman engineer, September 2025.

The interviews revealed that, although efforts to attract women into manufacturing have increased, many young women leave the industry later in their careers because of disappointment with non-inclusive cultures, reinforced by non-inclusive leadership practices. Interviewees also noted that resources for advancing diversity and inclusion in manufacturing and other STEM fields are often limited and reliant on voluntary work, increasing women's unpaid workload.

Nearly half of the survey participants with a disability, long-term health condition, or neurodivergence revealed having experienced discrimination or barriers at work related to these conditions. The experience shared by an interview participant facing chronic pain (**Box 4**) illustrates how such barriers can manifest in practice, highlighting the need for more flexible and inclusive workplace policies.

BOX 4. CHRONIC PAIN AND THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY OF FLEXIBLE WORK

Endometriosis is a chronic disease that can profoundly affect both physical and mental health. Symptoms vary according to the location of endometrial tissue, but chronic pelvic pain is the most common. Research shows that 95% of those living with the condition report a negative impact on their wellbeing, and approximately one in ten women (and those assigned female at birth of reproductive age) in the UK are affected by this chronic disease.

An interview participant shared her experience of navigating endometriosis in the workplace. For years, her condition remained undiagnosed, until she eventually underwent surgery. Although her health improved, she continues to manage ongoing symptoms that limit her ability to work full-time.

Trained in fashion and garment production, the participant began her career in a family-run manufacturing business. The physical demands of cutting fabric, standing for long periods, and moving heavy materials became unsustainable. When she proposed splitting her responsibilities between part-time cutting and sewing, her request was declined. Ultimately, she left the company, which has since closed. Reflecting on this, she felt that greater flexibility might have helped both her and the business adapt to changing circumstances.

Today, the participant works as an upholstery technician. She appreciates the flexibility to arrange her hours across the week, though she chooses to condense them into 2 days, but her voice is not always heard within hierarchical structures. While colleagues are permitted to work from home, she is required to be on-site because of decisions imposed by the health board. These inconsistencies highlight how organisational policies can overlook individual needs, and how more responsive leadership could address such inequities.

The participant emphasises the importance of listening to employees and co-creating workplace policies rather than imposing them from the top down. She also highlights the limited availability of local employment, recalling how community sewing groups were mobilised during the pandemic to produce medical scrubs. Although this initiative has since ended, she sees it as an example of the potential for alternative, community-based work models.

She suggests that developing new approaches to manufacturing, such as community-based work labs, could empower women with chronic health conditions by offering greater flexibility, voice, and inclusion.

Source: Interview with an anonymised woman upholstery technician, September 2025.

Similarly, 46% of women highlighted that menopause-related symptoms have negatively impacted their work, while 39% mentioned they have experienced discrimination or barriers at work because of menopause-related symptoms. These findings align with previous research in this area. A survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, across 2,000 women aged 40 to 60, revealed that two-thirds (67%) of those experiencing menopausal symptoms saw a negative effect on their work, with over half reporting not being able to go to

work because of menopause symptoms.²⁷ **Box 5** explains how the menopause can impact workplace wellbeing and offers practical advice for leaders on creating open dialogue and supporting staff effectively.

BOX 5. MENOPAUSE AND WORKPLACE WELLBEING

Menopause is a natural life stage, but for some it can lead to symptoms that significantly impact daily activities, including work. Symptoms such as fatigue, brain fog, anxiety, joint pain, or temperature regulation difficulties can become disabling. Our aim is to understand how menopause affects employees in manufacturing and what support can improve workplace wellbeing.

Quick tips

- ✓ Provide easier access to cold drinking water, washroom facilities (including sanitary products), and ability to control the room's temperature.
- ✓ Stagger a lunch hour over two half-hour breaks to alleviate muscular pains.
- ✓ Provide a quiet space to work or noise-cancelling headphones.
- ✓ Agree time away from work for meditation or relaxation activities, such as walking and breathing exercises.
- ✓ Provide "menopause-related" as an option on employee electronic absence systems.
- ✓ Ensure employee assistance programmes have options for counselling related to menopause matters, and an expert with knowledge on work-related menopause.
- ✓ Provide managerial training to increase the general understanding and awareness of menopause.

What to avoid

- Be aware of saying anything that could be interpreted as one of the three Ds: derisory (problematizing or shaming), dismissive (not listening or explaining away experiences), or discriminatory (connecting menopause to negative ascriptions or judgements about behaviour or performance).

What to say

- 🗣️ Thank you for letting me know: I'm confident we can work through any work concerns you have together / In what ways can I support you?
- 🗣️ Don't worry about anyone else finding out if you want it to remain confidential.
- 🗣️ I might have to consult with HR/OSH/senior manager to find out what our options are. Is that OK?
- 🗣️ You're important to the team so I want to make sure you continue to want to work with us.

Source: CIPD (2023). *Menopause in the workplace: Employee experiences in 2023*. London; 5-MINUTE MANAGER GUIDE: *Menopause and Reasonable Accommodation Practices*; 5-MINUTE MANAGER GUIDE: *Menopause-Related Absences*; 5-MINUTE MANAGER GUIDE: *Menopause-savvy conversations for line managers and supervisors*.

²⁷ CIPD (2023). *Menopause in the workplace: Employee experiences in 2023*. London.

Among those who have taken parental leave, other care-related leave, or long-term sick leave, half mentioned facing challenges balancing work and caregiving responsibilities after taking the leave, 20% considered their career progression was negatively impacted, and 20% felt pressure to return earlier than they were ready. Yet, over half also mentioned feeling supported by their managers and colleagues, and around a third recognised the importance of workplaces policies and flexible working arrangements.

Although we have focused on highlighting opportunity areas, survey participants also highlighted positive experiences working in manufacturing:

My employer is amazing!

I consider myself lucky; the company I work for is pretty supportive and accommodating.

I see our company to be naturally inclusive.

Survey participants

How can the manufacturing sector become more inclusive?

Research shows that in male-dominated industries a masculine non-inclusive culture is still prevalent and can work against marginalised groups who may not conform to these norms, including women, ethnic minorities, and disabled individuals.²⁸ Our survey and interview findings echo this, underscoring the critical role of inclusive leadership in shaping a more equitable workplace culture.

Survey and interview participants called for a more inclusive culture, tangible commitments from leadership, fair and transparent career development, and flexible working. There was also a strong call for improved listening, empathy, and allyship, with employers urged to foster safe, respectful environments where all voices are heard. Participants shared experiences of sexism, under-representation in leadership, and a lack of understanding around health needs such as the menopause (**Box 6**).

²⁸ See, for example: Acker, J. (2006) Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organisations. *Gender and Society*, 20(4): 441–464. DOI: 10.1177/0891243206289499; Ford, J., Atkinson, C., Harding, N. and Collinson, D. (2021). “You Just Had to Get on with It”: Exploring the Persistence of Gender Inequality through Women’s Career Histories. *Work, Employment and Society*, 35(1): 78–96; Zanoni, P. (2011). Diversity in the lean automobile factory: doing class through gender, disability and age. *Organization*, 18(1): 105–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508410378216>

BOX 6. HOW CAN THE MANUFACTURING SECTOR BECOME MORE INCLUSIVE?

The following quotes reflect a range of lived experiences from survey participants. They highlight both the barriers and opportunities for making the sector more inclusive, and how gender issues interact with ethnicity-, disability-, age- and care-related challenges. These personal insights provide a powerful reminder that inclusion is not generic and must be shaped by the voices of all those it aims to support.

Commitment from leadership

There is only so far employee-led groups can take things without the support and championing from top down, but there is value in the two collaborating. You also can't do it without including everyone and not leaving out one group as they then struggle to support it and feel involved.

Inclusive culture

Keep focusing on raising the conversation about different experiences in the workplace and encourage curiosity to understand others, and make it part of normal conversation.

A lot of young Black women fight an invisible battle. Self-belief is challenging in a space that is not built for people like me. There are a lot of silent battles and it's incredibly lonely. I am literally always the only one in the room. Working from home is literally my escape but that is not an option for my role but not impossible to accommodate. Maybe asking for empathy is asking for a lot given the lack of awareness but it's incredibly difficult sometimes. I just want to escape the micro-aggressions and focus on my job.

Flexible working

Accept that caregiving is not only a female responsibility. Show more flexibility in understanding the family pressures parents face in return. I would have been happy to work outside non-core hours to ensure job responsibilities were completed on time and in full.

Support remote meetings and reduce travel requirement.

Meetings are often held early or late, meaning childcare constraints often lead to missed information and being "left out" of conversations.

Career development

Career development opportunities and helping to identify my areas of improvement. I cannot currently see a future with my current employer and so visualising my progression would help.

Menopause

Currently, menopause practical support would be beneficial but instead of real action they host a talk. Additional flexible working options, consideration of the impact of brain fog, hot flashes, and other menopause symptoms.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2025). Shaping an inclusive manufacturing sector survey.

3. Guiding principles to lead with inclusion

In the *Women in UK Manufacturing 2024* report,²⁹ we introduced a framework for an inclusive manufacturing industry with equal opportunities and a diverse workforce. The framework set out guiding principles for companies and trade associations, alongside five practical steps for implementation. These steps emphasised the importance of leadership commitment and the active championing of inclusion. In this report we take a closer look at the concept of inclusive leadership and outline practical actions manufacturing leaders can take to promote more inclusive workplaces.

What is inclusive leadership?

Based on reviews of the inclusive leadership literature and systematic analysis of 17 studies in manufacturing contexts, we found inclusive leadership to be a type of leadership most often defined through behaviours and practices that uphold fairness and equity, foster a sense of belonging, and provide a safe environment in which team members can contribute authentically as their unique selves. **Box 7** presents perspectives from manufacturing employees on inclusive leadership.

Inclusive leadership is characterised by a clear commitment and a proactive approach to uphold fairness and equity, foster a sense of belonging, and create an environment where team members feel safe to contribute authentically and where their individuality is valued.



WOMEN IN UK MANUFACTURING 2024 REPORT

²⁹ Castañeda-Navarrete, J. et al. (2023). *Women in UK Manufacturing 2024: Addressing labour shortages and bridging the gender gap. A review of best practices for diversity and inclusion*. University of Cambridge.

BOX 7. EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

The following quotations present interview participants' responses to the question: What does inclusive leadership mean to you?

Making sure that you have a good working environment that maximises the potential for a diverse workforce...(and)...that everyone has a voice within the business...no matter what their background.

(Ensuring that) everybody should have a voice and opportunity.

Inclusive leadership means treating people fairly...according to their need.

It's about adjustment. Understanding the needs of people, making sure that your leadership makes space for them.

...just making sure everybody feels comfortable in the room and everybody's got a voice and everybody's treated completely equally... And nobody gets to dominate and you know, just because they're the majority group... I think for me that's that's how it should be, but I guess that's like an ideal.

Source: Women in Manufacturing (2025). Participant interviews.



Why is inclusive leadership important?

Inclusive leadership is important in light of efforts to diversify the manufacturing workforce. Simply recruiting, developing, and promoting individuals from under-represented groups does not guarantee that their abilities will be fully leveraged or that their voices will be genuinely heard in decision-making processes. Without inclusive leadership, diversity efforts risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative, leaving employees feeling marginalised or disengaged. By contrast, inclusive leaders create a climate where individuals experience belongingness and are valued for their uniqueness, enabling them to contribute authentically and effectively to organisational goals.³⁰

This approach is both ethical and linked to positive business outcomes. Research has shown that inclusive leadership enhances employee voice behaviour, strengthens the team climate and trust, and reduces employee turnover.³¹ There is also evidence that it fosters innovation and creativity by encouraging knowledge sharing and organisation identity,³² including in domains such as environmental sustainability and green innovation.³³

What is not inclusive leadership?

The literature on inclusive leadership also emphasises that not all diversity management is synonymous with inclusive leadership. Three distinct practices to be aware of are as follows:

- **Exclusion** occurs when individuals are treated as outsiders and neither their belongingness nor uniqueness are acknowledged. Exclusion can be subtle, even when there are policies to accommodate certain groups' needs. An example is when recruitment from under-represented groups occurs but these employees are then excluded from meaningful projects or advancement opportunities.
- **Assimilation** occurs when employees achieve a sense of belonging only by suppressing their individuality. This can happen, for example, when international employees are expected to adopt dominant cultural behaviours while their diverse perspectives are overlooked. Similar dynamics affect women, who may feel pressure to adopt "masculine" attitudes to fit in. Several interview participants highlighted this issue. One woman entrepreneur we interviewed noted that her academic training in business management, marketing, and innovation was essential to "*be like the big boys*". Jennifer Hughes' experience, presented in **Box 8**, further illustrates how assimilation remains common in the manufacturing sector.
- **Differentiation** is where uniqueness is celebrated but without genuine belonging. For instance, when women or minority staff are showcased for symbolic diversity purposes

³⁰ Randel et al. (2018). *Inclusive leadership: Realizing positive outcomes through belongingness and being valued for uniqueness*. *Human Resource Management Review*, 28(2): 190–203.

³¹ See, for example, Orekoya (2024). *Inclusive leadership and team climate: The role of team power distance and trust in leadership*. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 45(1): 94–115.

³² See, for example, Korkmaz, A. V. et al. (2022). *About and beyond leading uniqueness and belongingness: A systematic review of inclusive leadership research*. *Human Resource Management Review*, 32(1): 100894.

³³ See, for example, Mandal, V. and Pal, D. (2024). *Going green from within: The mediation of employee green creativity in the relationship between green inclusive leadership and green organizational citizenship behaviour*, *Global Business Review*, 1–19.

but remain marginalised from core decision-making, another common behaviour highlighted by research participants.³⁴

Guiding principles

Based on the literature on inclusive leadership and insights from our survey and interviews, we identified five key principles to foster more inclusive workplace cultures in the manufacturing sector. These follow a dual approach focusing on both people and business performance. They also respond directly to the barriers raised by employees while providing a strategic foundation for embedding inclusion into both organisational policies and industry-wide practices. Importantly, they recognise that inclusion is not generic but must be shaped by the diverse voices of all those it aims to support.

1. *Fairness, respect, and trust*

Inclusive cultures begin with fairness and equity in how employees are treated and supported. Leaders must ensure resources and opportunities are accessible to everyone and adaptable to individual needs. Building trust requires openness, respect across all levels, and a visible commitment to recognising contributions. Practical steps that leaders can take include:

- Treating all team members fairly, ensuring equity and transparency in how people are supported and recognised
- Guaranteeing accessibility of resources, infrastructure and equipment, adapting them to meet individual needs, and
- Embedding respect and anti-discrimination commitments into codes of conduct and enforcement mechanisms to ensure accountability.

2. *Open communication and valuing uniqueness*

A crucial aspect of inclusive leadership is to create safe spaces where employees can voice concerns and share ideas. Open communication is essential when building this environment, as it signals transparency, trust, and respect from leaders. Equally important is valuing uniqueness, including recognising and appreciating the distinct skills, perspectives, and experiences that individuals bring. Practical steps that leaders can take include:

- Establishing formal channels for open, two-way communication, such as forums, anonymous reporting, and 360-degree feedback. **Box 2** presents how Arla Foods UK has introduced frontline listening groups, while **Box 8** shows how Jennifer Hughes has implemented formal mechanisms to improve communication in Transicon, her family business.
- Actively recognising and rewarding diverse perspectives to solve business challenges and as a driver of continuous improvement, and
- Encouraging experimentation and risk-taking, particularly in eco-innovation and digital transformation initiatives.

³⁴ Shore et al. (2011). *Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research*, *Journal of Management*, 37(4): 1262–1289.

The experience of Jennifer Hughes, General Manager of Transicon, also illustrates the important role of leaders in valuing uniqueness and ensuring that people feel able to be their authentic selves at work (**Box 8**).

BOX 8. TRANSICON: CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES IN MANUFACTURING



Jennifer Hughes is the General Manager of Transicon, a family-owned engineering business where she oversees design, software and hardware engineering, shop floor operations, installation teams, and a 24/7 service division. Her route into this role was unconventional: she trained as a chartered accountant and began her career in finance, including roles at large, listed companies.

Jennifer initially joined Transicon to support reporting and analysis, but during the COVID-19 pandemic she found herself leading day-to-day operations. This experience shifted her trajectory from finance to operations leadership, and she eventually became general manager.

Gendered expectations and leadership challenges

Jennifer's early experiences reflect how gendered expectations shape career paths. Her first work experience placement in the family business was in accounts, working alongside her mother, rather than on the technical side of engineering. "Although it was an engineering company, I did work experience in finance rather than going out and learning the technical side," she recalls.

Now in leadership, Jennifer often encounters bias that challenges her leadership position. She describes a typical incident: "An enquiry was transferred to my phone and I said, 'Hello, how can I help you?' And they said, 'Oh no, I want to speak to someone to help me with something technical.'" She notes:

I shouldn't have to modify my personality to be taken seriously, but that's often the case for women in this industry.

These daily micro-aggressions stand in stark contrast to her earlier career in accountancy, where she felt the gender balance was stronger and women were more readily accepted in professional roles.

Building inclusive leadership

Jennifer defines inclusive leadership as ensuring that people feel able to be their authentic selves at work:

Where I felt most included were places that I could be my whole self...where people can say what they actually think and be who they actually are without fear.

In her current role, she has introduced practices to strengthen communication and inclusion. These include regular one-to-one reviews, feedback mechanisms that allow employees to voice concerns, and external occupational health support that is accessible to all staff. She has also championed the appointment of technical managers to ensure employees have supervisors who understand their work.

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Photo: Jennifer Hughes

Recognising the company's gender imbalance, Jennifer has also led changes in recruitment. Outdated job titles were replaced with gender-neutral alternatives, and job advertisements were rewritten to encourage applicants who meet "most" rather than "all" criteria. Transicon has also increased its STEM outreach, sponsoring projects in schools and engaging with local communities. These initiatives are already showing results: "This year, our work experience students were a 50/50 gender split, which we never saw before."

Jennifer emphasises that flexible working is a vital tool for smaller manufacturers seeking to attract and retain talent, helping them to compete with larger employers. At Transicon, this has included hybrid arrangements that allowed valued engineers to continue working from abroad, as well as flexi-time models on the shop floor that let staff adjust start and finish times while maintaining coverage.

Jennifer is enthusiastic about exploring 4-day-week and 9-day-fortnight models, recognising the potential of such pilots to support wellbeing and retention. "I'm fascinated by the 4-day working models... It looks like it's working really well," she remarks, underlining her commitment to gradual experimentation rather than generic solutions.

The power of networks

Jennifer stresses the importance of external networks for women in male-dominated sectors. As the only woman on her company's board, she found it helpful to connect with peers through the WiM UK initiative and Women with Metal:

That shared experience means you don't feel alone... It gives you strength in situations where it's difficult to deal with things in the moment.

Jennifer's experiences offer clear lessons for inclusive leadership in engineering and manufacturing. Her story illustrates both the persistence of bias and the practical steps leaders can take to make inclusion real.

Source: Interview with Jennifer Hughes, General Manager, Transicon.

3. Equitable career development opportunities

Transparent and fair career pathways give employees confidence that advancement is based on merit rather than informal networks or bias. Our survey showed that a lack of career progression was one of the most frequently cited reasons for leaving manufacturing, highlighting the importance of addressing this gap. When career development is equitable, it reduces turnover and strengthens employee motivation and engagement. Practical steps that leaders can take include:

- Developing clear career pathways and communicating them openly to all employees
- Providing mentoring, sponsorship, and training opportunities
- Aligning performance evaluations with inclusive behaviours, and
- Regularly reviewing pay structures and promotion practices to address inequities.

4. Wellbeing and life stage support

Inclusion requires recognising diverse life stages and health needs. Survey respondents emphasised the importance of flexible working, accessible facilities, wellbeing programmes, and practical support for the menopause. Practical steps that leaders can take include the following:

- Adopt flexible working arrangements by identifying solutions that balance individual needs, job requirements, and business demands. As highlighted in **Box 8** and **Box 9**, flexible working is more than working from home and can include a range of practical approaches tailored to manufacturing contexts.
- Ensure facilities, equipment, and uniforms are accessible to all employees. **Box 10** and **11** show examples of the importance of communicating with employees to adapt facilities, equipment, and uniforms to their needs.
- Introduce practical menopause support, such as adjusted work schedules, access to tailored resources, and greater awareness across teams and managers (**Box 5** provides additional information and advice on how to create and open the dialogue about the menopause and support staff effectively).
- Provide regular communication and tailored support to employees returning from extended leave, ensuring they are effectively included and feel valued on their return.

BOX 9. FLEXIBLE WORKING IN MANUFACTURING

Flexible working looks different depending on the person (and their life stage), their role, and the organisation where they work. But, overall, it involves providing employees with some choice and control over where, when, or how much someone works. It can be informal or formal (in a contract), or a mix of both, and it does not include things like zero hours contracts, over which you have no control.

Flexibility Works, a consultancy firm that supports employers to develop more flexible workplaces, has five practical tips for manufacturers to create more flexible ways of working:

1. ***Advance notice, reliable, and predictable shifts.*** If you can plan ahead and give people more notice about their shifts, including specifics about location if this varies, and have some regular patterns, this will give employees more control over the rest of their life.
2. ***Direct rota input for employees, including swaps.*** Make it simple for people to select and change shifts. There are some good apps that can help teams to communicate clearly, view rotas, and swap shifts quickly, as well as email and group messaging.
3. ***Flexible hours and locations.*** By offering flexibility in working hours and locations, you create opportunities for a wider range of individuals to participate, including parents, caregivers, and disabled people. Flexible arrangements may involve part-time roles, compressed hours (doing fewer, longer days), or a twilight shift, among others. Even a small amount of remote work, where feasible, can greatly benefit individuals with busy schedules.
4. ***Know your team.*** Take the time to understand the personal circumstances of your team members. This knowledge allows you to create shift patterns that align better with their needs, even if it might not be possible to accommodate everyone's preferences all of the time.
5. ***Communicate effectively and empathetically.*** Ensure that employees are aware of the support and benefits available to them within the company. Encourage and facilitate the use of leave entitlements and provide clear information on the available resources.

For more information about Flexibility Works, please visit: flexibilityworks.org

Source: Flexibility Works (2023). Flex for Life 2023; Gallagher, L. (2023). Why flexible working is part of the “future of work” for manufacturers. InterAct Blog. Box taken from the *Women in UK Manufacturing 2024* report.

BOX 10. MOLSON COORS: MOVING INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP FORWARDS

Roisin has spent 16 years at Molson Coors Beverage Company, a leading global brewer, where she is currently Regional Operations Director for the UK and Ireland. In this role she oversees four factories and a workforce of more than three hundred employees.

Her interest in engineering was sparked at a young age. While traditional career guidance at school focused on medicine or law, Roisin's passion for problem-solving, first expressed through childhood hours spent with Lego, led her towards engineering. The influence of her uncle and his partner, both engineers, reinforced her conviction that this was a viable path for women as well as men. Supported by bursaries and sponsorships aimed at



Photo: Roisin Carr

increasing women's participation in engineering, she pursued a degree in manufacturing engineering, gaining valuable practical experience through work placements.

Roisin began her professional career at AstraZeneca on a manufacturing graduate scheme, where she progressed from technical roles into the management team. Over the years, she advanced to senior leadership, driven by a strong interest in not just manufacturing processes but leading people. Today, she manages complex operations across multiple sites while championing a culture of inclusivity.

An inclusive leader

Roisin traces her journey into inclusive leadership back to training she received 5 years ago, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. A key realisation came when she challenged the traditional advice to "treat people how you want to be treated". Instead, she argues, inclusive leadership means treating people how they want to be treated, recognising the individual needs, perspectives, and circumstances of employees.

Treat people how they want to be treated.

This principle underpins Roisin's leadership style. She is actively involved in business resource groups, which provide employees with safe spaces to share experiences and influence company policy. For example, the gender business resource group was instrumental in revising maternity and paternity policies, achieving more balanced parental leave across the organisation.

Practical steps for moving inclusion forwards

Roisin emphasises that inclusivity often requires small but significant adjustments. By engaging directly with employees, she identified issues such as factory uniforms that did not meet the needs of women, people with religious dress requirements, or those with health conditions. Adjustments to uniforms, facilities, and workplace practices have followed, ensuring employees feel supported and able to work effectively.

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Other examples include providing set desks for neurodiverse colleagues in otherwise flexible office spaces, and investing in accessible facilities in factories.

She also recognises the importance of open conversation about previously taboo subjects. At Molson Coors, employee-led discussions about the menopause resulted in training for all managers, partnerships with external providers, and tailored workplace adjustments. What began as a focus on women's health widened to broader issues, from uniforms suitable for diverse needs to private spaces and fridges for administering and storing medication. This evolution illustrates how inclusive leadership benefits all employees, not just specific groups.

Challenges and future directions: flexible working, allyship, and mentorship

Roisin acknowledges that manufacturing presents particular challenges for inclusive leadership. Flexible working, for example, is often seen as difficult, or impossible, to implement in a manufacturing environment. Her advice to other manufacturers is to pilot new working arrangements, adapt policies to the context of each factory, and remain open to learning from setbacks.

She emphasises that cultural change must come before diversity. Without inclusive practices embedded in everyday operations, recruits from under-represented groups may struggle to feel accepted or to succeed. Hiring more women or under-represented employees, she argues, will only be effective when accompanied by inclusive facilities, policies, and leadership behaviours that create psychological safety.

Equally important, Roisin calls for linking inclusion to measurable performance outcomes. Demonstrating its impact on safety, quality, productivity, and morale is critical to embedding inclusion in the language of manufacturing, a sector that values data and key performance indicators. While she recognises that such impacts take time to become fully visible, she notes clear improvements in employee morale and retention as early indicators of progress.

Looking ahead, she identifies mentorship, representation, and male allyship as essential to progress. These practices, she believes, will not only support women's confidence to pursue leadership roles but also strengthen the manufacturing sector by ensuring that inclusive leadership becomes standard practice.

Source: Interview with Roisin Carr, Regional Operations Director for the UK and Ireland, Molson Coors Beverage Company.

5. Social impact

Aligning inclusive leadership with broader societal and environmental goals is essential for building resilient and future-focused organisations. By embedding these priorities into workplace practices, leaders strengthen organisational identity and inspire employees to take shared responsibility for challenges such as climate action, community wellbeing, and equitable social development. Practical steps that leaders can take include:

- Partnering with local communities to address regional disparities and reduce social inequalities
- Inspiring collective responsibility for environmental goals by recognising, rewarding, and scaling eco-friendly behaviours and practices, and
- Encouraging and supporting employee-led sustainability initiatives, including environmental projects and volunteering activities that benefit society.
- Promoting diversity and inclusion within your supply chain by engaging businesses owned by under-represented groups, partnering with inclusive companies, and ensuring that both direct and indirect employees experience fair working conditions.

For Gary Sheader, Founder and Managing Director of the Manufacturers' Alliance, business leaders have a vital opportunity to drive change and set a positive example, particularly in today's challenging climate, where political leaders often call for division rather than solidarity (**Box 11**). His experience also shows how engaging with local communities can help to create more inclusive workplaces. Jennifer Hughes also highlighted how outreach activities have helped Transicon to achieve gender balance in new recruitments (**Box 8**).



BOX 11. THE MANUFACTURERS' ALLIANCE: LEADING WITH CARE



Gary Sheader is the Founder and Managing Director of the Manufacturers' Alliance, an organisation that supports leaders and owners in the manufacturing sector, especially SMEs, to become more effective, modern, and resilient.

Gary's journey into manufacturing began as a teenager when he joined an apprenticeship at an aerospace company. What struck him most was not just the technical training but the emphasis on developing the individual. The programme combined practical learning with personal growth, instilling in him an early understanding that leadership is about people as much as it is about processes.



Photo: Gary Sheader

Over the following decades, Gary worked across manufacturing, initially as an electrical engineer, before moving into leadership roles. His career took him from managing change within organisations to establishing the Manufacturers' Alliance in 2013. The Alliance grew from small networking events into a peer-learning platform that supports manufacturing businesses through collaboration, problem-solving, and leadership development. At its heart, Gary's work has always been about helping people to feel supported and safe.

The most successful companies are those where leadership comes from a place of genuine care for other people.

Inclusive leadership and psychological safety

For Gary, inclusive leadership begins with one principle: psychological safety. He believes leaders must create environments where employees feel comfortable to speak up, share challenges, and be themselves.

This requires self-awareness on the part of leaders. Gary notes that several people have reached out to him in times of difficulty because they trusted him as a safe person to talk to. He approaches these delicate conversations from a place of non-judgement and helps people to feel seen and heard. He has learned how to manage his own emotions and triggers, enabling him to listen deeply when people share their most challenging thoughts and feelings. He accepts people as they are and not from a place of whether they are right or wrong.

His approach to recruitment and management reflects this commitment. New team members are asked not just about their role but about what a "brilliant week" looks like for them – whether that involves childcare, hobbies, or caring responsibilities. The aim is to shape roles around individuals' lives rather than force them into rigid patterns: "Why would you not do that? We're all different anyway."

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Practical recommendations for inclusive leadership

Gary's experiences point to several practical steps leaders can adopt:

- Start with psychological safety. Inclusion requires that people feel safe to express themselves, raise concerns, and admit mistakes.
- Adapt work to people's lives. Ask employees what an ideal week looks like and build flexibility where possible. This not only supports wellbeing but also strengthens commitment.
- Use feedback as a development tool: 360-degree feedback can be uncomfortable, but Gary sees it as essential. It helps us to understand how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived by others, and provides clear and honest development areas.
- Engage in outreach. Partnering with schools and charities can broaden access to manufacturing careers. For example, one company Gary worked with organised "blind" football sessions with a local charity, helping employees understand the challenges faced by visually impaired colleagues and inspiring changes to workplace accessibility.

Driving change through care

Gary is clear that inclusive leadership extends beyond the workplace: it is a societal imperative. For him, inclusion is not a matter of compliance or profit but a commitment to recognising and valuing people as individuals. He argues that in today's challenging climate – where political leaders often call for division rather than solidarity – business leaders have a vital opportunity to drive change and set a positive example.

If we can look after people, society, and the planet better than we're doing, the noise of those who want endless profit and exploitation just becomes background noise.

His message is simple yet powerful: inclusion begins with creating environments where people feel safe, valued, and respected. From there, diversity and performance will follow.

Source: Interview with Gary Sheader, Founder and Managing Director, the Manufacturers' Alliance.

4. A call to action

We call on business leaders and policymakers to place inclusive leadership at the core of their work, and to support the development and launch of a UK Manufacturing Equality Charter, ensuring that diversity and inclusion are recognised not as compliance obligations but as strategic drivers of competitiveness, innovation, and long-term sustainability. Building on the framework outlined in our *Women in UK Manufacturing 2024* report,³⁵ we have identified five key priority actions for business leaders:

1. ***Champion equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in leadership.*** Ensure that a dedicated board- or senior-level leader is responsible for driving and monitoring EDI initiatives across the organisation. Leverage your role to influence change and promote awareness across your network.
2. ***Assess the current state of workforce diversity and inclusion.*** Conduct an assessment of the organisation's current diversity and inclusion landscape to identify gaps and opportunities.
3. ***Define the organisation's EDI vision and targets through participation.*** Engage employees and other stakeholders in a participatory process to define a clear EDI vision and set measurable targets that align with the organisation's goals.
4. ***Identify key initiatives and engage employees.*** Develop targeted initiatives to achieve the EDI vision and goals, ensuring active employee engagement.
5. ***Monitor progress.*** Establish mechanisms for regular monitoring and reporting of progress.

Strategic and programme leaders can accelerate more inclusive cultures in manufacturing by:

1. ***Investing in research and analysis*** to build a robust evidence base on the effectiveness and impact of EDI initiatives.
2. ***Embedding inclusive communication practices*** across all programmes and projects using inclusive language and imagery, and ensuring that dissemination activities reach women's professional networks and other organisations championing under-represented groups.
3. ***Setting clear participation and representation targets*** to promote balanced representation and participation of different demographic groups in support programmes. For example, programmes could aim for 30%–40% of supported companies to be women-led or women-owned.
4. ***Integrating EDI-related indicators*** into project assessment criteria and outcomes frameworks, ensuring EDI considerations are embedded throughout the evaluation process. For example, to promote institutional change, the EU has included having a gender equality plan as an eligibility criterion to gain access to Horizon Europe.³⁶
5. ***Conducting EDI impact assessments*** to identify and mitigate any potential negative effects of policies or initiatives.

³⁵ Castañeda-Navarrete, J. et al. (2023). *Women in UK Manufacturing 2024: Addressing labour shortages and bridging the gender gap. A review of best practices for diversity and inclusion*. University of Cambridge.

³⁶ EU (2021). *Horizon Europe. Gender equality*. A strengthened commitment in Horizon Europe. doi:10.2777/410001

Appendix A. Guidelines for inclusive events

In response to a request from the WiM community, this appendix presents guidelines for inclusive events. The following information is drawn from the Dissemination Access Principles guide. For more detailed guidance on dissemination access and practical tips, please see the full guide. [Source: AAAiLabs (2023). Deane KHO and the Access All Areas in Labs Team. Access All Areas in Labs: Access Guidelines. Version 1.1. July 2023. Principles. University of East Anglia, Norwich.]

Guidelines to remember

Be aware of issues with vision, hearing, mobility, speech, mental wellbeing, energy limitations, dietary restrictions, toileting needs, and understanding information presented in some ways well or at all. If any barrier cannot be avoided, please state this clearly and offer alternatives, to avoid frustration and disappointment from participants.

Before the event, think of the following:

- Actively ensure that speakers represent a balance of genders, ages, ethnic backgrounds, job positions, and disabilities. If your existing network lacks diversity, reach out to professional associations and community organisations (women's networks, disability advocacy groups, etc.) to identify suitable contributors.
- Make it explicit that disabled people are welcome at your event.
 - Ask clearly about access needs but keep all disclosures confidential.
 - Train your staff and brief speakers on expected standards of behaviour to promote accessibility.
 - Make sure the events team knows – for dissemination – the relevant details about the venue's accessibility.
- Use gender-neutral and culturally sensitive language in all event materials and ensure they are available in accessible formats, including digital.
- Consider the whole journey to attend the event: transport, accommodation, and venue access.
- Provide quiet rooms, which are helpful for many disabilities.
- Offer free carer tickets with simple proof requirements.

During the event, remember the following:

- Invite attendees to contact you if they have any concerns. Provide clear information about on-site services and who to approach in an emergency.
- Offer auto-transcription for online events and audio transcription for live conferences.
- Ensure everyone uses a microphone in group events, including speakers and audience members.
- For virtual or hybrid events, pay particular attention to visual and hearing access.
- Suggest that presenters introduce themselves with a brief visual description, for example "I am a White woman with short brown hair, wearing a blue floral dress".

- If someone needs assistance to evacuate the premises (with hearing, vision, or mobility impairments), either provide them with a generic personal emergency evacuation plan or ask them to contact a named person to create a personalised one.
- If anyone has any dietary needs, ask them to contact a named person to identify how they will be accommodated.
- You might wish to let speakers know that you would appreciate accessible slides. Ask if slides can be shared, as this often improves access. Also, if you are using BSL interpreters, remind them to speak slowly enough so the interpreters can keep up.

After the event, consider the following:

- Gather feedback on accessibility and representation from attendees to identify improvements for future events.
- Review any incidents or challenges related to access and representation and update your processes accordingly.
- Evaluate whether all information and communications about the event were accessible and effective.
- Share learnings with your wider team or community to promote inclusive events.

Venue access checklist

An accessible venue needs all bold items to be checked for it to be described as “fully” accessible.

Accessible venue checklist:

- ☒ Step-free entrance to the venue (thresholds not higher than 3 cm; if not the front door, clear signage should be provided).
- ☒ Routes at least 1 m wide from step-free entrance to bar/food service, toilets, and meeting/event room (capacity may need adjusting to ensure this).
- ☒ Lift or stair lift access in working order, with weight limit specified and contingency plan if out of service.
- ☒ Step-free access to the meeting or event room.
- ☒ Public address system available, or capacity to bring one in.
- ☒ Good lighting on the speaker.
- ☒ Step-free access to any stage.
- ☒ Hearing loop or other hearing technology available.
- ☒ Good ventilation (e.g. <800ppm CO₂ or ~10 l/s/person).
- ☒ Temporary issues such as building works noted, with alternate access routes in place.

Refreshments:

- ☒ Lowered counter available for people using wheelchairs.
- ☒ Card payment machine reachable from a seated position (including for those who cannot raise arms above shoulder height).
- ☒ Hearing loop or hearing technology at the serving counter.
- ☒ Clear information available on allergens in food or drink.
- ☒ Facilities to reheat puréed food.
- ☒ Straws available on request.

Toilets:

- ☒ Provide accessible and clearly marked toilets, including gender-neutral.
- ☒ Step-free access to the accessible toilet.
- ☒ Toilet free from extra furniture or clutter (including baby changing tables).
- ☒ Red alarm cord present, untied, functional, and responded to.
- ☒ Check which side the toilet transfers to (as you face it) and provide that information on your venue guide.
- ☒ Accessible toilet clearly signposted (extra signage provided if not).
- ☒ Bins available to accommodate incontinence pads.
- ☒ Toilets clean across all types and genders.
- ☒ Changing Places accessible toilet available, or nearby and open during the event.

Fire safety:

- ☒ Discussion held with the venue's fire officer about evacuation for people with mobility, hearing, or vision impairments (including any restrictions).

Parking:

- ☒ Accessible parking available nearby, with location and number of spaces shared in venue guide.

Quiet room:

- ☒ Quiet room available.
- ☒ Step-free access to the quiet room.

We would like to acknowledge the kind support of the Women in Manufacturing 2025 conference platinum sponsors:



The *Women in UK Manufacturing 2025* report provides an overview of the progress made over the past year and the challenges that remain for women in the manufacturing sector. This edition focuses on leadership and inclusion, examining how workplace culture and organisational practices shape women's participation and advancement. The report provides guiding principles to lead with inclusion and calls for manufacturing leaders to work collectively to advance gender equality and strengthen the sector's future.

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