

# Beyond qualifications what drives women to the top

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## “Every girl can reach the boardroom if they desire – with our help”

By Vicky Brook Fellow

As I famously said [live on BBC News](#) in November 2025:

“Every girl can reach the boardroom if they have a desire – with our help.” That wasn’t just a soundbite—it reflected a conviction built from years of curiosity: what really fuels female success, not in theory, but in the lived reality of how women rise to the top? Is it the schools they attend, the degrees they hold, or the development programmes they complete? Or is it the cultures they choose, the organisations that value their voice, reward contribution, and make space at the table? Or does it go back even further, to experiences that shape resilience, confidence, and leadership long before a first job?



My own path to the boardroom was far from conventional. I didn’t take the straight path from school to university to graduate scheme. I studied while working, the Open University first, then CIPD—while raising my two daughters. And when it came to them, I made intentional choices, grounded in instinct rather than science. I chose unisex clothing, ensured trains and work tools were in the toy box, prioritised team sports over solo pursuits, took them to men’s football matches, and encouraged friendships with boys. Why? Because I had grown up in a male-dominated household and believed that being shaped by those environments had given me resilience, confidence, and comfort in male spaces, qualities I carried into the workplace.

I must have done something right: my daughters have risen remarkably. My eldest is now Legal Counsel at F1 and my youngest is a proud MQ Mental Health Research Ambassador, navigating diverse career paths and one with significant health challenges. Both grew up for a large part with a single mother, yet the experiences we created together, encouraging curiosity, [resilience](#), and confidence seems to have laid the foundations for their own achievements.

At the time, I didn’t have research to confirm my instincts. But when I founded the Women’s Leadership Group (WLG), that curiosity became a mission: to understand the real origins of female leadership, not for curiosity’s sake, but because if we want to move the dial on representation in senior leadership and boardrooms, we need to understand what truly makes women succeed.

Over 18 months, I led a UK study examining 41 senior female leaders across 24 sectors—from SMEs to organisations with turnovers exceeding £300 million. Their experiences were strikingly diverse, yet a clear pattern emerged: leadership is nurtured long before women reach the boardroom. Childhood experiences, early responsibility, sport, and supportive relationships cultivate resilience, strategic thinking, and confidence qualities that underpin leadership capability.

Family dynamics were a key influence. Most women grew up with multiple siblings, negotiating shared spaces, collaborating, and competing. These everyday interactions developed adaptability, confidence, and influence behaviours that later underpin leadership effectiveness. Early competition, often against boys, strengthened assertiveness and resilience, showing that leadership potential is cultivated far from classrooms or workplaces.

Sport was another formative influence. Nearly two-thirds of the cohort played team sports, and 46 per cent held captaincy roles. These weren’t just extracurricular activities; they were arenas to practice teamwork,

accountability, decision-making, and performing under pressure skills that formal education alone rarely provides.

Education, while common – degrees, MBAs, and executive programmes was rarely the spark. Some women were told they weren't "academic" yet one went on to earn doctorates. Another, to this day, has no formal degree but sits on some of the UK's biggest boards. Leadership was not defined by qualifications, but by capability, resilience, and the courage to step up when opportunity arose. Many participants were working mothers, including single parents, who juggled childcare and career and found themselves with a seat at a boardroom table in Chicago.

Psychometrics confirmed gendered patterns: women favoured visionary approaches, male leaders results-focused ones. Yet these tools cannot capture the "why"—how capabilities were forged through lived experience, early responsibility, sport, and navigating bias. Some faced discriminations but proved resilience and capability. Leadership is not a snapshot; it is a story built over decades.

**Context also matters. In the construction focus group a sector with male dominance, the psychometric data showed a widening divergence. Men's visionary orientation reduced while their results orientation strengthened. Women, by contrast, increased both visionary and results orientation expanding rather than narrowing.**

**This is relevant because it challenges the assumption that women assimilate to dominant norms in male-dominated sectors. Instead, the data suggests context can amplify difference, not reduce it.**

At the same time, there is still a reluctance to hire female board members from outside the organisation or who haven't previously "proved themselves" in that sector, illustrating how circumstance and bias continue to shape opportunities at the top.

If organisations are serious about gender parity, we must rethink how we identify and develop talent. Too often, we focus on fixed milestones: degrees, promotions, psychometric results. This narrow lens misses the vast wealth of female capital nurtured outside conventional pathways.

#### **Five principles emerge from the study:**

1. Start early. Nurture leadership potential from childhood through sport, early responsibility, and supportive relationships.
2. Broaden what counts. Recognise visionary, relational, and strategic leadership alongside results-driven approaches.
3. Support transitions. Mentoring, sponsorship, and flexible development enable women to step into leadership despite caregiving, career pivots, or sector changes.
4. Redefine promotion criteria. Value diverse leadership styles over narrow archetypes.
5. Embed nurture in culture. Create environments where leadership can be practised, supported, and recognised across levels and pathways.

Adversity also plays a formative role. Financial hardship, part-time work, caregiving, and discrimination were not barriers but catalysts, strengthening resilience, empathy, and problem-solving, the very qualities needed at the top.

Female leadership is a lifelong journey, not a single moment. By recognising and investing in female capital early, we can give every girl the confidence, skills, and opportunity to reach the boardroom. Every girl can do it—if she has the desire, the support, and someone willing to help her along the way.