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Beyond the FTSE 350: Why Visibility Could Be the Next Step in Women's Leadership Progression



For more than a decade, the UK has demonstrated that visibility can help drive change in women's representation at the top of business.

The progress made across FTSE-listed organisations following initiatives including the Hampton-Alexander Review and the FTSE Women Leaders Review has shown the value of structured measurement, transparency and accountability.

But there is a significant question still to answer:

What about the rest of the UK economy?

The majority of women in work are not employed by FTSE 350 companies.

They work across thousands of organisations, sectors and regions where there is currently no comparable framework for understanding women's progression into leadership.

That is the challenge at the heart of the Women's Leadership Group's Beyond the FTSE 350 programme.

Learning from what has worked

WLG believes the lessons from FTSE reporting provide an important starting point. The principle is straightforward: if we can see where women are progressing, where

they are not and where barriers may exist, we have better evidence to inform action.

As one policymaker recently put it: "what gets measured, gets done." But extending measurement beyond the FTSE 350 should not mean simply creating another layer of reporting for employers. WLG's work has identified an opportunity to make better use of workforce information organisations already hold.

The first phase focused on understanding the barriers organisations face in measuring women's leadership progression, identifying opportunities to improve visibility and testing whether there was support for a more consistent national approach. The response has been encouraging.

Early findings indicate that organisations recognise the value of better workforce data and greater visibility of women's progression. There is also strong interest in learning from the FTSE experience while developing an approach that works for organisations beyond listed markets.

The missing picture

At present, it can be difficult to build a clear national picture of women's leadership progression across different sectors, regions and organisation sizes. That makes it harder to understand where progress is happening and where barriers remain. An organisation may have strong female representation overall but a very different picture when its leadership pipeline is examined. Another business might be successfully progressing women into leadership while a similar organisation elsewhere is struggling.

Without consistent visibility, those differences can remain hidden. Better data has the potential to change that. It could allow employers to benchmark leadership progression against organisations of a similar size or sector. It could help identify regional differences and highlight where successful approaches are emerging.

For policymakers and regional leaders, better evidence could also help inform where targeted support may have the greatest impact.

From consultation to pilot

WLG has now entered Phase 2 and is inviting organisations with 100 or more employees from across the UK to participate in a national consultation.

The consultation is designed to test the proposed framework, explore willingness to participate in a national pilot and assess the feasibility of sharing aggregated, non-personal workforce data using existing HR systems.

Organisations that complete Phase 2 and express an interest in participating will then be invited into Phase 3, the pilot phase. This is an important distinction.

WLG isn't presenting a finished solution and asking employers simply to adopt it. It is inviting employers to help validate the approach.

That means listening to businesses, understanding what is practical, identifying potential barriers and refining the model based on real-world experience.

Turning data into insight

Collecting data is only the first step. The real value comes from being able to understand what that data is telling us. That is why WLG is delighted to be working with Inicio AI as its data partner for the initiative.

As organisations participate in the consultation and, subsequently, the pilot, the aim is to make better use of the workforce data already held within existing HR systems. Inicio AI will support the data stage of the programme, helping to make sense of the information collected and turn it into meaningful, actionable intelligence.

For WLG, this is an important part of the approach. The objective isn't to create another reporting exercise or generate statistics that simply sit in a spreadsheet. It is about creating visibility.

By bringing together consistent, aggregated and non-personal data, the programme has the potential to reveal patterns in women's leadership progression across organisation sizes, sectors and regions. That could help employers understand where women are progressing successfully, where barriers may exist and where further action or support could be needed. Technology has an important role to play in making that possible.

As Rachel Curtis, Founder and CEO of Inicio AI, explains, the opportunity is to make the collection of evidence simpler, more consistent and ultimately more useful in driving meaningful change

The partnership therefore brings together two complementary strengths: WLG's understanding of the challenges around women's leadership progression and Inicio AI's expertise in using technology and data to generate insight.

The ambition is not simply to collect more data. It is to make the data work harder for employers, policymakers and women themselves.

That is ultimately what could make the pilot so valuable: creating a practical evidence base that helps move the conversation from "How are we doing?" to "What do we need to do next?"

A challenge for the whole economy

The Beyond the FTSE 350 campaign is ultimately about widening the lens.

The progress made in the UK's largest listed companies has demonstrated what visibility, measurement and accountability can achieve.

The next question is whether those lessons can be translated into a practical approach that works across the much wider UK economy.

For WLG, the ambition is clear: to support every woman in work, not only those employed by organisations already covered by existing FTSE reporting frameworks.

That requires evidence.

It requires collaboration between employers, policymakers and other stakeholders.

And it requires a willingness to look beyond the organisations already receiving the greatest attention.

The national consultation is an opportunity for employers to help shape what comes next.

Because if we want to understand where women are progressing, where barriers remain and where action can make the greatest difference, we first need to make that progression visible.

Beyond the FTSE 350 is about doing exactly that.