

PRESS RELEASE

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New Nordic white paper reveals systemic barriers preventing women from reaching leadership roles

Report outlines 17 targeted actions to address structural barriers hindering leadership progression

Copenhagen / Oslo / Stockholm, April 17, 2026 — The Nordic life science sector is losing highly qualified female talent in top leadership positions, according to a new white paper published by Women in Life Science Denmark (WiLD), WiLD Norway, and VILDA Sweden.

Despite women representing the majority of the highly educated workforce in the life science sector, they remain underrepresented in executive teams, boardrooms, capital allocation forums, and other key decision-making roles – positions where organisational and financial power is concentrated.

The report, based on insights from 212 senior professionals across the Nordic region, shows that three out of four female leaders have encountered barriers during their careers — particularly at the point where expertise is expected to translate into formal authority.

“The Nordic life science sector does not have a talent problem. It has a conversion problem. The system is not consistently turning qualified women into decision-makers,” said Lene Gerlach, Chair of WiLD Denmark.

Barriers emerge where power concentrates

Despite strong qualifications and ambition, the report identifies a consistent structural pattern across the Nordic countries:

- *Mid-career is the critical bottleneck where careers either convert into senior leadership, or stall*
- *Access to networks, sponsorship, and visibility becomes more decisive than performance alone*
- *Closest leaders and top management both enable careers and control access to opportunity*

One in five respondents report having experienced harassment or exclusionary behaviour, highlighting that barriers are reinforced not only structurally, but also through how power is exercised in practice.

The findings also show that men are more frequently identified as contributors to barriers, reflecting how leadership and decision-making power are currently distributed, while both men and women are almost equally represented as sources of support.

At the same time, support structures weaken as responsibility increases, creating a structural bottleneck just below the highest levels of leadership.

A systemic issue not a pipeline problem

The white paper challenges a widely held assumption: that increasing the number of qualified women will naturally lead to more balanced leadership. Instead, it concludes that the issue lies in how leadership systems operate — including access to visibility, sponsorship, and decision-making arenas. Progression is not determined by competence alone, but by proximity to decision-making power.

“This is not only about leadership, but about who controls the money and makes the decisions, be it boards, public committees, and private capital forums. These are where decisions about research and innovation are made, which ultimately funnel what our care systems deliver. If the Nordic model cannot translate talent into leadership in life science, across industry, academia, and health care, we need to question how well the system is working”, remarked Chelsea Ranger, Chair of WiLD Norway.

A competitiveness issue for the Nordic life science sector

The life science sector is a cornerstone of Nordic innovation, economic growth, and healthcare advancement. Leadership decisions shape which research is prioritized, how capital is allocated, and which innovations reach patients. If decision-making power does not reflect the available talent, the sector risks systematically overlooking both expertise and market opportunities.

When leadership does not reflect the available talent, the sector risks underutilizing expertise and limiting innovation potential – and overlooking both expertise and market opportunities.

“If the Nordic life science sector does not fully utilize its leadership talent, it risks limiting both innovation and long-term competitiveness. This is not only about representation, it is about ensuring that the best ideas, expertise, and perspectives are brought into decision-making at the highest levels”, added Christina Östberg Lloyd, Chair of VILDA Sweden.

The report calls for a shift from isolated diversity initiatives to system-level changes in how leadership pipelines, sponsorship, and access to power are structured.

To support this shift, the white paper outlines 17 concrete recommendations targeting companies, boards, investors, and policymakers — focused on increasing transparency in leadership pathways, strengthening sponsorship, and expanding access to decision-making and capital allocation arenas.

Key recommendations for action

The report outlines 17 targeted actions for companies, boards, investors, and policymakers to address structural barriers in leadership progression. Key priorities include:

- *Make leadership pathways transparent*
- *Formalise sponsorship at senior levels*
- *Open access to decision-making arenas*
- *Increase transparency in board and recruitment processes*
- *Track and act on leadership data*

The conclusion is clear: the Nordic life science sector does not lack talent – it loses it at the point where power begins.

The report is available to view [here](#).

About Women in Life Science Denmark (WiLD), WiLD Norway and VILDA Sweden

Women in Life Science Denmark (WiLD), WiLD Norway, and VILDA Sweden are professional networks working to strengthen the visibility, influence, and leadership representation of women across the Nordic life science sector.

Together, they form a collaborative Nordic platform connecting senior executives, board members, entrepreneurs, and leading researchers across industry, academia, healthcare, and investment environments.

Their shared mission is to unlock the full talent potential of Nordic life science by increasing diversity and inclusion in leadership, strengthening leadership pipelines, and ensuring broader access to decision-making roles.

They also advocate for recognizing that the leadership gap is directly linked to the women's health gap as who holds decision-making power shapes which research, innovation, and health priorities are advanced. Through cross-border collaboration, leadership initiatives, and ecosystem engagement, the networks contribute to a more representative, innovative, and competitive life science sector in the Nordics.

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