

From Talent to Power

Why women in Nordic life science are not reaching the highest leadership roles — and what needs to change

April 2026



Executive summary

The Nordic life science sector is built on a highly educated and specialised workforce and plays a central role in advancing healthcare, innovation, and economic growth. Its continued success depends on its ability to fully utilise the available talent base.

Across the Nordic countries, women represent more than half of the highly educated talent pool in life science. Yet this majority is not reflected where decisions are made. Women remain underrepresented in executive leadership teams, boardrooms, and other positions of organisational power, where they would hold the ability to shape decisions and allocate resources.

This white paper examines that gap.

Based on a Nordic survey conducted by Women in Life Science Denmark (WiLD), Women in Life Science Norway (WiLD Norway), and VILDA in Sweden, with 212 total responses from a network of more than 750 senior professionals, the findings provide a detailed view of how leadership careers develop – and where they stall. Career stages (early, mid, late) are based on self-assessment by respondents.

The results show that Nordic women in life science are not lacking in experience, ambition, or qualifications. More than 65% of respondents have over 20 years of professional experience, and 92% hold a Master's degree or higher. Many already occupy senior leadership roles, including C-level and board positions.

Still, three out of four respondents report having encountered barriers during their careers.

This pattern becomes particularly visible at key transition points. These barriers are not experienced as random or isolated. They follow a consistent pattern across respondents, suggesting underlying structural dynamics.

Barriers are most visible when recognised competence is expected to translate into formal authority, particularly during the mid-career move into senior leadership and governance roles – particularly during the mid-career transition into senior leadership and governance roles.

At this stage, advancement becomes less dependent on individual performance alone and more dependent on access to visibility, sponsorship, networks, and decision-making arenas.

The survey highlights that the same actors who enable careers – closest leaders and top management – are also the most frequently identified sources of barriers. This points to a fundamental dynamic: career progression appears to be strongly influenced by those who control access to opportunity for women who demonstrate capability.

The findings also reveal that support structures weaken as responsibility increases. While many women receive support when entering leadership roles, fewer experience the same level of sponsorship and access when progressing toward positions with greater authority and influence.

Country comparisons show variation in timing. In Denmark, barriers tend to intensify later in careers, while in Norway and Sweden they appear earlier but decrease over time. However, the underlying pattern is consistent across all three countries: barriers become more visible as careers approach positions where power is concentrated.

Taken together, the findings point to a clear conclusion:

The challenge is not a lack of qualified women but how leadership and power structures operate at senior levels

The talent exists - but current systems do not consistently support the development of talent into senior leadership.

This reframes the challenge. The issue is not how to prepare more women for leadership. It is how leadership systems, organisational structures, and power dynamics determine who is seen, trusted, promoted, and ultimately given access to influence.

Addressing this requires more than incremental initiatives. It requires a shift in how organisations think about leadership pipelines, sponsorship, and access to decision-making.

For a sector that depends on innovation, expertise, and global competitiveness, this is not only a question of representation. It is a question of whether the Nordic life science ecosystem is making full use of the leadership capacity it already has.

1. Introduction: Why leadership diversity matters in life science

The Nordic life science sector has grown into a critical part of the region's economy and innovation landscape. It encompasses pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, medtech and diagnostics firms, academic research institutions, clinical development organisations, and a growing set of digital health and investment actors.

The sector's strategic relevance rests on three characteristics:

- First, it is knowledge intensive. Competitive advantage depends on scientific capability, regulatory expertise, clinical insight, and the ability to translate research into viable products and services.
- Second, it is talent dependent. Leadership quality directly affects whether organisations can attract, retain, and mobilise the highly specialised people needed to innovate.
- Third, it is mission critical. Decisions taken by leaders in this sector shape not only business performance, but also the pace at which new treatments, diagnostics, and healthcare solutions reach patients.

In such a sector, leadership diversity is not peripheral. Leadership teams define strategic priorities, allocate resources, shape organisational culture, and determine which ideas and people receive visibility and support.

This influence extends beyond organisational outcomes to the direction of research, innovation, and investment. When decision-making bodies are not representative of the populations they serve, important areas – such as conditions that disproportionately affect women – risk being underfunded or overlooked.

In that sense, the leadership gap and the women's health gap can be understood as structurally connected: those who hold decision-making power and financial control influence which scientific questions are prioritised, which solutions are developed, and how effectively healthcare systems respond to real population needs. Studies such as McKinsey's report on *The \$50 billion opportunity for US health systems to improve women's healthcare* and the World Economic Forum's *Blueprint to close the women's health gap* highlight how gaps in research, funding, and prioritisation of women's health conditions lead to significant health and economic losses.

Research across industries shows that more diverse leadership teams are associated with stronger decision-making and improved organisational performance. McKinsey's *Diversity Matters Even More* shows that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity in executive teams are significantly more likely to outperform financially. In knowledge-driven sectors such as life science, where innovation depends on combining different forms of expertise and perspectives, this becomes particularly relevant.

At the same time, the Nordic countries are often viewed internationally as leaders in equality and labour market participation. This makes the life science sector an important test case: if highly qualified women still face structural barriers to senior leadership here, the issue is not simply one of pipeline, but of how leadership systems operate.

This white paper examines that question through the lens of Nordic women active in life science today.

2. About the networks

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

Together, they form a collaborative Nordic platform connecting communities across Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and, more recently, Finland. WiLD was founded in Denmark in 2022 and has since expanded with WiLD Norway (2024) and WiLD Finland (2026). VILDA, established in Sweden in 2022, operates as a complementary network with a shared mission to advance women's leadership in life science.

The networks bring together senior executives, board members, experienced specialists, entrepreneurs, and leading researchers from across industry, academia, healthcare, and investment environments. They provide trusted forums for knowledge exchange, visibility, and cross-sector relationship building within the Nordic life science ecosystem.

Their shared ambition is to help unlock the full talent potential of Nordic life science by strengthening diversity and inclusion in leadership. Although women are strongly represented across the workforce, they remain underrepresented in top management, boardrooms, and other positions of influence.

Through leadership initiatives, community building, and cross-border collaboration, the networks contribute to stronger leadership pipelines and increased visibility of female talent. In doing so, they also support a broader structural shift: improving how leadership reflects the populations served by the sector, and thereby strengthening the conditions for more inclusive innovation, more representative research priorities, and, ultimately, better health outcomes.

3. Methodology

The findings presented in this report are based on a Nordic survey conducted in November 2025 by Women in Life Science Denmark (WiLD), WiLD Norway, and VILDA Sweden.

The survey was distributed to more than 750 members across the three networks in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. A total of 212 respondents participated.

Respondents represent experienced professionals working across the life science ecosystem, including pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, medtech and diagnostics firms, academic research institutions, private and public organisations within healthcare, consulting firms within law, IP and regulatory affairs, and investment environments.

The survey examined multiple dimensions of career development, including:

- Professional background and experience
- Current leadership roles
- Professional ambitions
- Career enablers
- Structural barriers
- Access to decision-making forums
- Contributions to leadership diversity and equity

The respondent group reflects a senior and highly qualified segment of the Nordic life science workforce, providing insight into leadership dynamics at advanced career stages.

The survey is not a statistically representative sample of the full Nordic life science workforce but reflects the perspectives of women working across the sector. It provides a relevant insight base for identifying structural patterns, particularly in relation to leadership progression, access to opportunity, and the role of organisational and systemic factors.

The findings should therefore be interpreted as an analysis of leadership dynamics and structural conditions within the Nordic life science ecosystem, rather than as a comprehensive population-level study.

4. Profile of respondents

The survey respondents represent a highly experienced and highly educated group of professionals across the Nordic life science ecosystem.

More than 65% reports over 20 years of professional experience, and the majority are between 40 and 59 years old, placing them in the most influential stages of their careers.

A skilled and experienced group of women

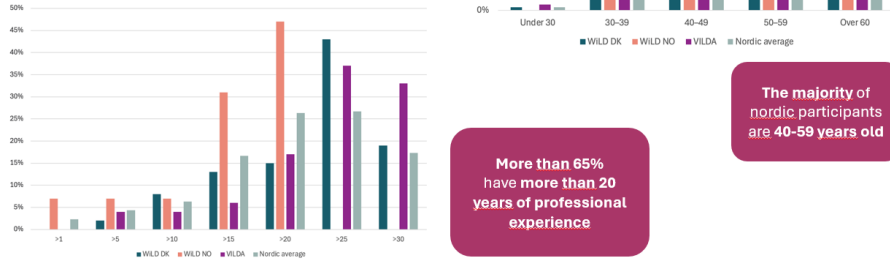


Figure 1 – Respondent experience and age distribution

The educational profile of respondents is equally strong. 92% hold a Master’s degree or higher, including a substantial share with doctoral degrees. This reflects the knowledge-intensive character of the life science sector.

Strong academic background

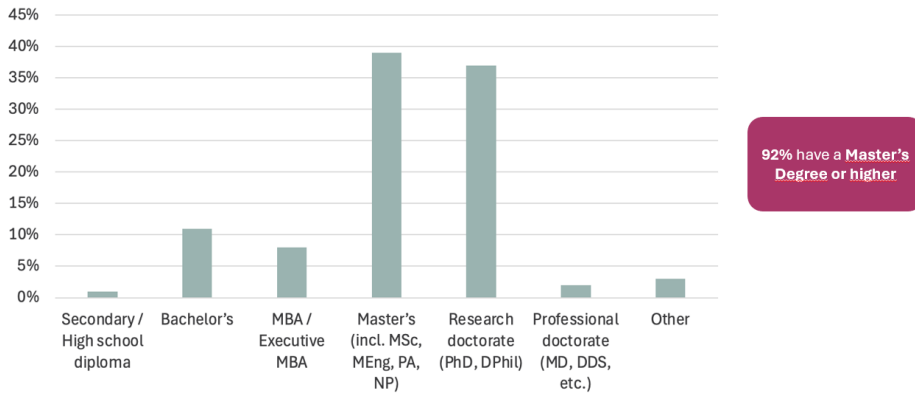


Figure 2 – Education level of respondents

Most respondents work in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors, although the survey also captures professionals from medtech, diagnostics, academia, consulting, and adjacent life science functions.

Extensive industry knowledge

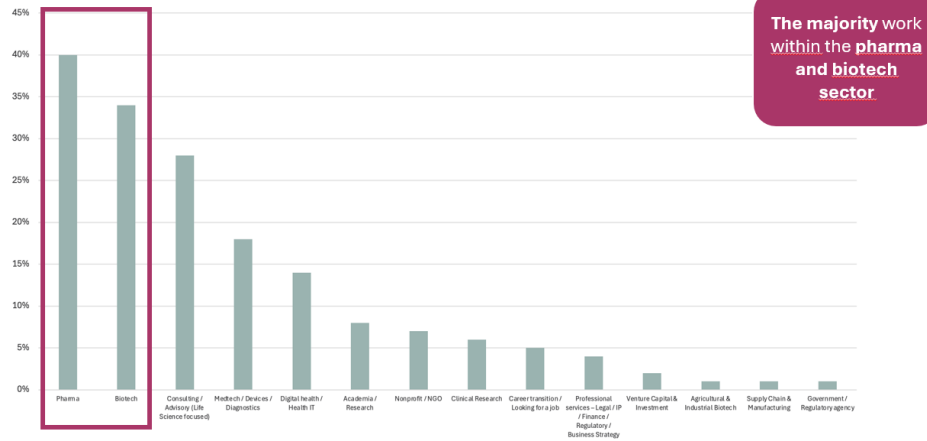


Figure 3 – Industry distribution of respondents

The respondents are not junior professionals at the start of their careers. Many already hold positions with significant formal influence. Approximately one in three occupies a C-level role, and one in four holds a board position.

Members hold high-level positions across life science industries

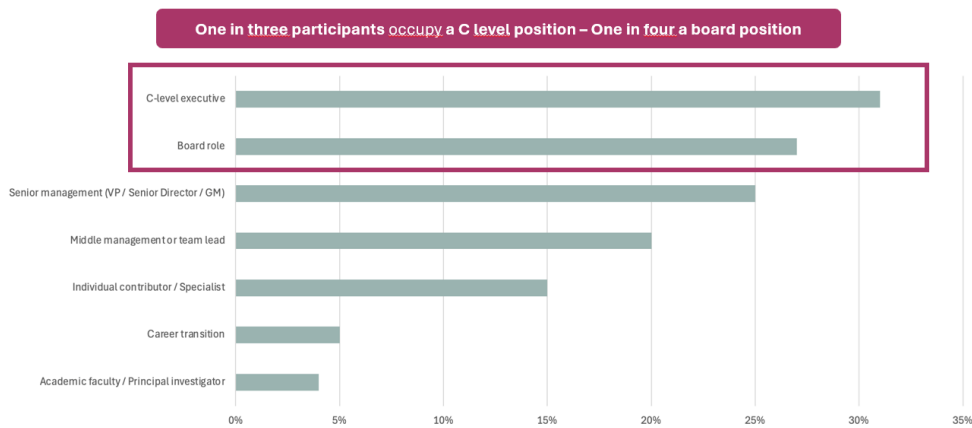


Figure 4 – Leadership and board positions among respondents

This matters for how the data should be interpreted. The survey does not primarily reflect aspiration from the outside. It reflects the experiences of women who are already in, or close to, positions of influence and who therefore provide direct insight into how leadership systems operate.

5. Professional goals and leadership ambitions

The survey shows that respondents remain highly ambitious regarding their professional development.

A large share aims to secure a board position or move into a larger-scale or higher-impact leadership role within the next one to three years.

Short-term professional goals

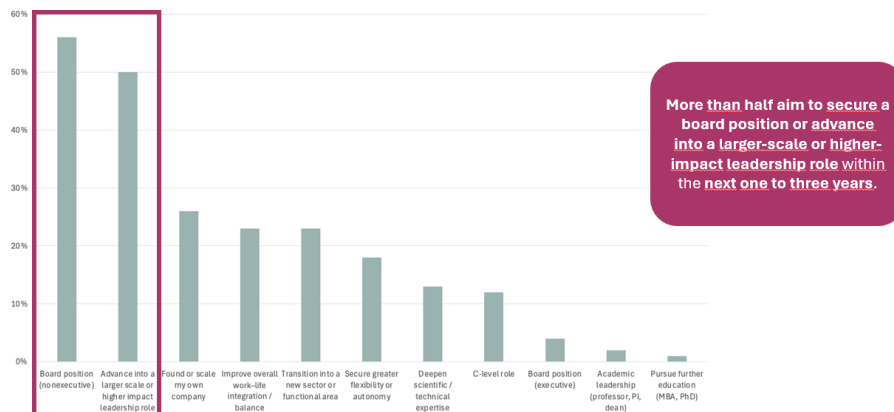


Figure 5 – Short-term professional goals

These ambitions are consistent with the seniority of the respondent group. Many already hold influential roles and are now looking to expand their leadership scope, move into governance, or increase their strategic impact.

When asked what support would help them achieve these goals, respondents identified a clear set of priorities.

Support needed to reach professional goals

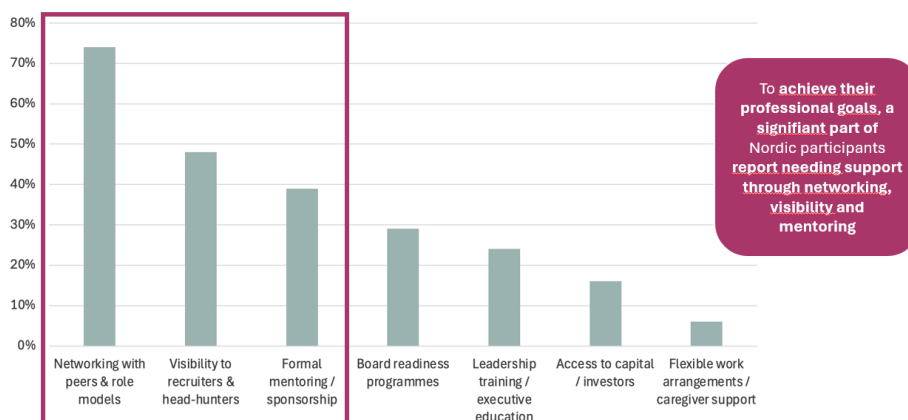


Figure 6 – Support needed to reach professional goals

The most frequently mentioned support mechanisms are:

- Networking with peers and role models
- Increased visibility to recruiters and head-hunters
- Formal mentoring or sponsorship

This is strategically important. It suggests that the issue is not lack of ambition or readiness. Rather, progression depends on whether professionals gain access to the networks, visibility, sponsorship, and institutional recognition that open the next leadership door.

6. Career enablers

The majority of respondents report having experienced career enablers during their professional journeys.

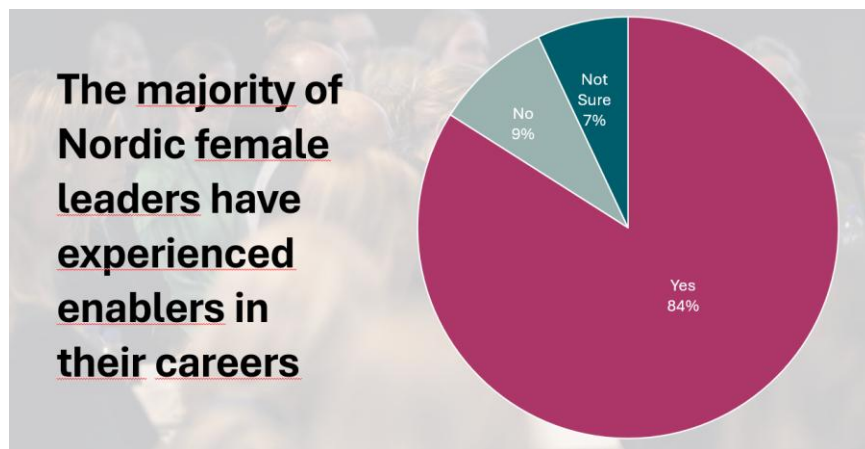


Figure 7 – Share of respondents experiencing career enablers

The most frequently cited enablers include:

- Workplace champions or sponsors
- Professional networks
- Role models
- Mentors

Enablers of members' career development

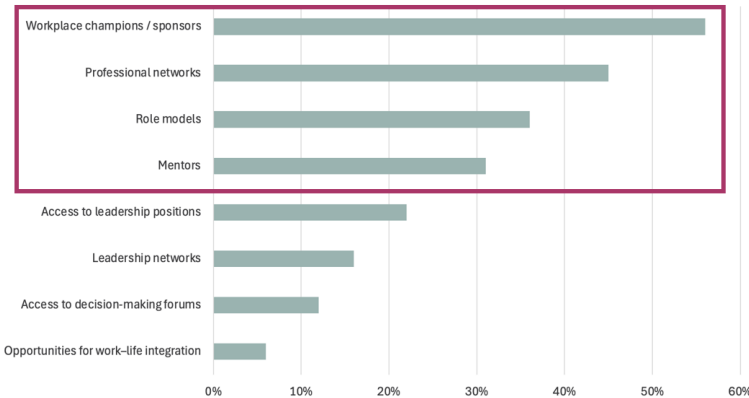
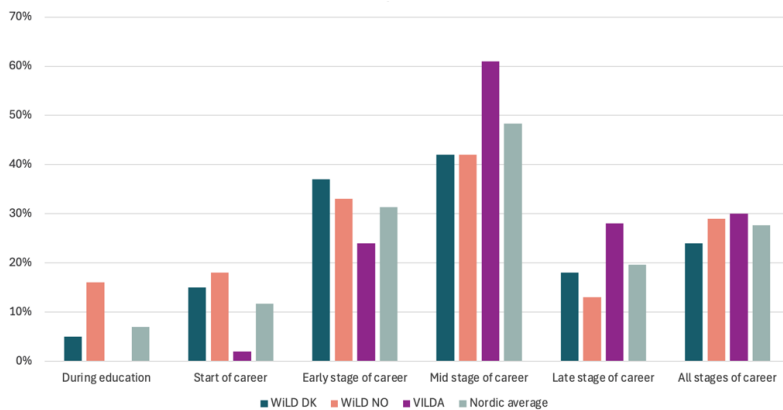


Figure 8 – Key enablers of career development

These are not generic support functions. They are mechanisms that increase visibility, confidence, opportunity, and access.

The data also shows that enablers vary across career stages. In Norway and Denmark, they tend to be strongest in early and mid-career stages, while in Sweden they appear more strongly in the mid-career stage.

Career stages at which enablers emerge



Enablers in careers vary across the Nordics. In Sweden, they are highly experienced in the mid career stage, whereas in Norway and Denmark, they tend to appear in early and mid career stages and to a lower degree in the late career stage.

Figure 9 – Career stages at which enablers emerge

At the career stage, enablers are strongest around new leadership roles and mid-level leadership positions. This suggests that organisations and networks do provide support when women first move into formal leadership.

A further important insight concerns where support comes from.

Origins of enablers

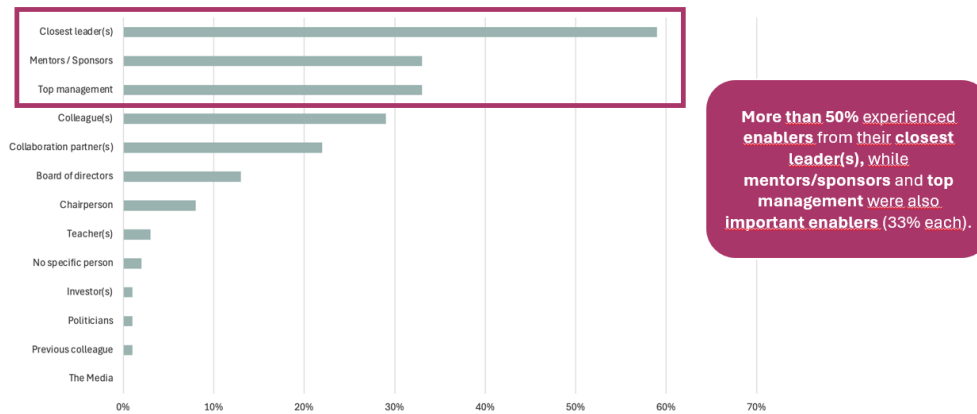


Figure 10 – Origins of career enablers

Closest leaders are the most frequently cited source of career enablers, while mentors, sponsors, and top management also play important roles. The gender distribution of enablers is also notable: men and women appear almost equally as enablers, indicating that support for women’s progression is not confined to one gender alone.

This is strategically significant. It shows that enabling structures already exist in parts of the ecosystem. The issue is therefore not whether support is possible, but whether it is consistent and sustained across the stages where leadership power consolidates.

7. Structural barriers

Despite widespread experiences of support, the survey also shows that three out of four respondents have encountered barriers during their careers.

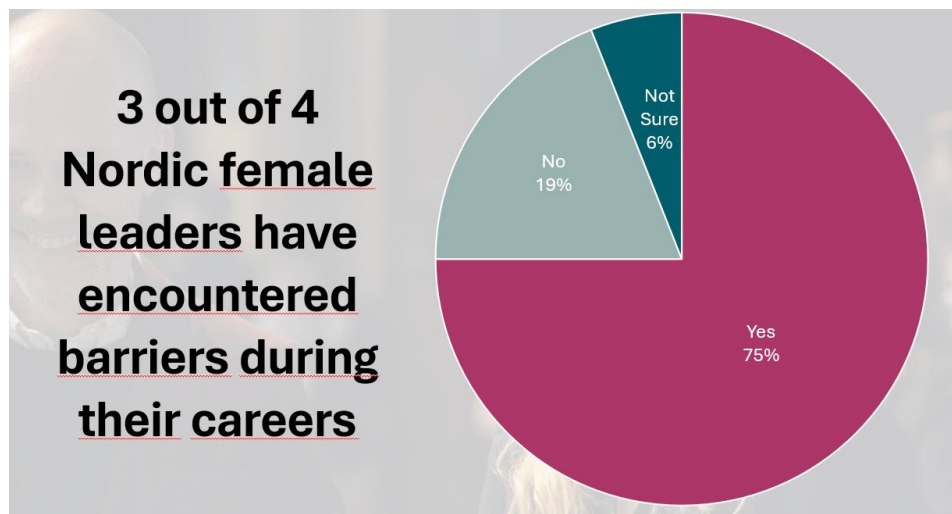


Figure 11 – Share of respondents encountering barriers

The most frequently reported barriers are:

- Unequal pay or compensation gaps
- Lack of access to leadership positions
- Limited access to decision-making forums
- Gender bias in hiring or promotion

Barriers to members' career development

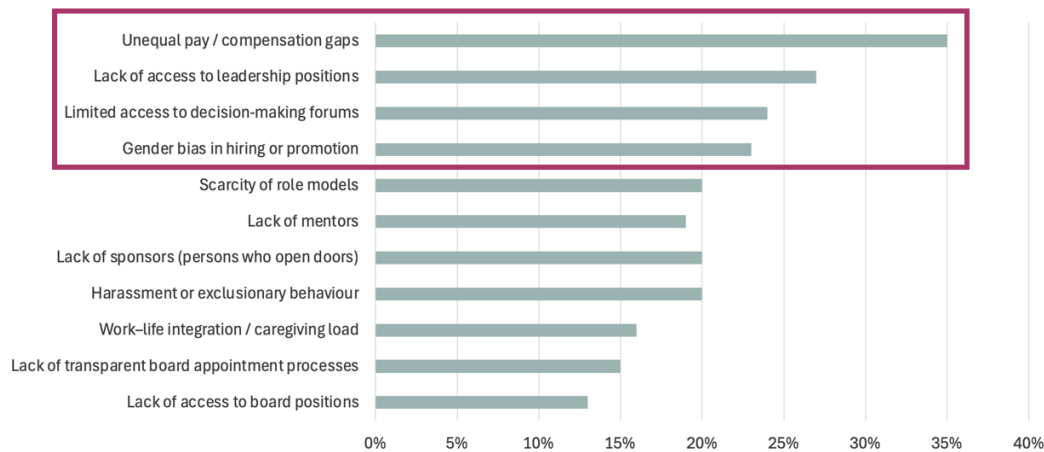


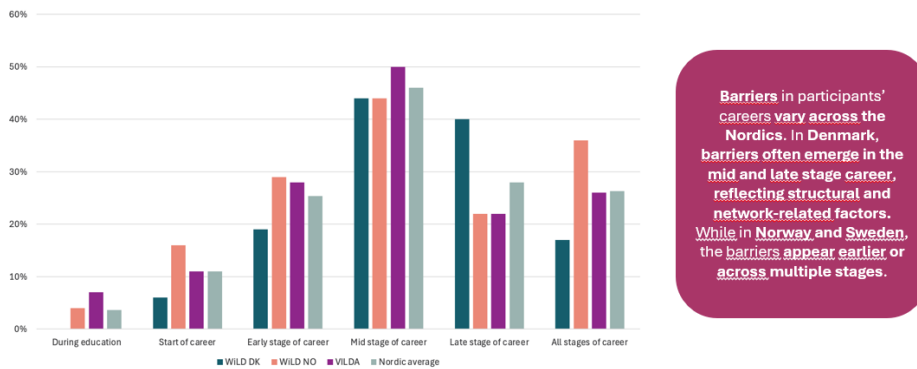
Figure 12 – Top barriers to career progression

These barriers are consistent with Nordic analyses identifying structural challenges such as unequal access to networks, biased promotion practices, and lack of transparency in leadership selection processes (Fjern barriererne, 2024). OECD (2024) similarly highlights that women remain underrepresented in management positions in Denmark despite high levels of education, pointing to persistent gaps in leadership outcomes.

Moreover, 20% of respondents report having experienced harassment or exclusionary behaviour during their careers. Other barriers include scarcity of role models, lack of mentors and sponsors, work-life integration pressures, and lack of transparent board appointment processes.

The survey also shows that barriers are not evenly distributed across the career journey. They are most pronounced at mid-career stage across the Nordic countries. Denmark stands out by having a high level of barriers at late-stage career.

Career stages at which barriers emerge

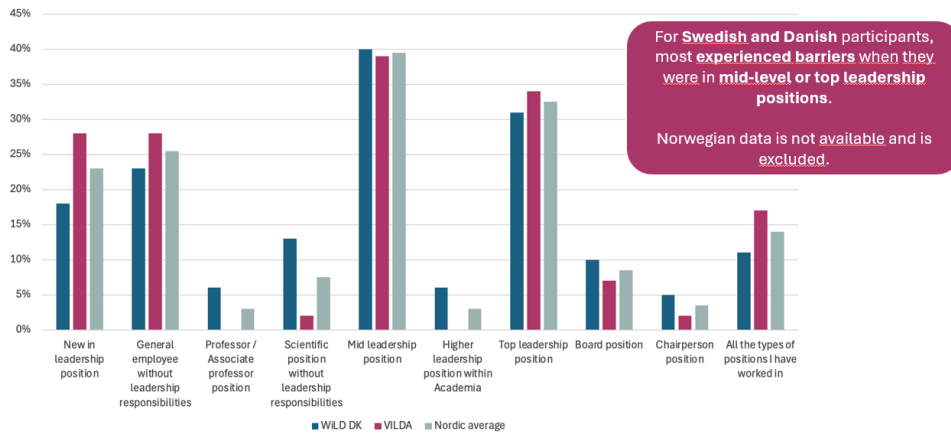


Barriers in participants' careers vary across the Nordics. In Denmark, barriers often emerge in the mid and late stage career, reflecting structural and network-related factors. While in Norway and Sweden, the barriers appear earlier or across multiple stages.

Figure 13 – Career stages at which barriers emerge

At career stage, barriers are most frequently encountered in mid-level and top leadership positions, suggesting that structural resistance intensifies as women move into positions where formal authority, visibility, and strategic responsibility increase.

Job positions in which barriers emerge



For Swedish and Danish participants, most experienced barriers when they were in mid-level or top leadership positions. Norwegian data is not available and is excluded.

Figure 14 – Job positions in which barriers emerge

The data on origins of barriers is particularly revealing.

Origins of barriers

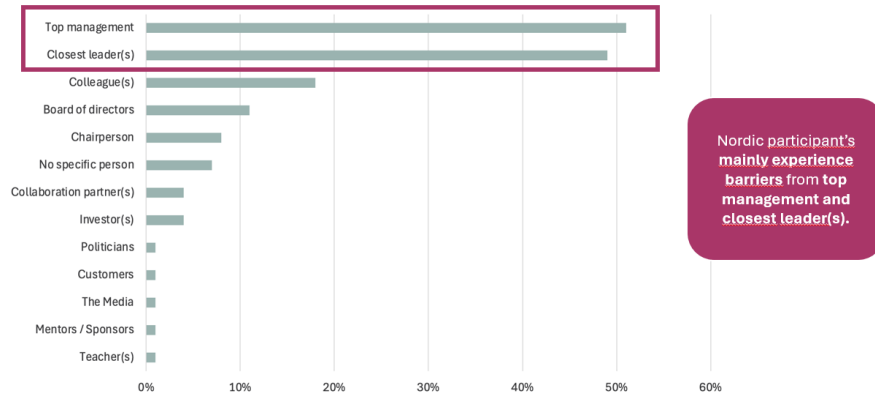


Figure 15 – Origins of barriers

Barriers are most frequently attributed to top management and closest leaders. This means that the same actors who can enable careers also have the greatest power to block them.

The gender pattern is also clear: men are disproportionately identified as contributors to barriers, while men and women appear much more balanced as contributors to enablers.

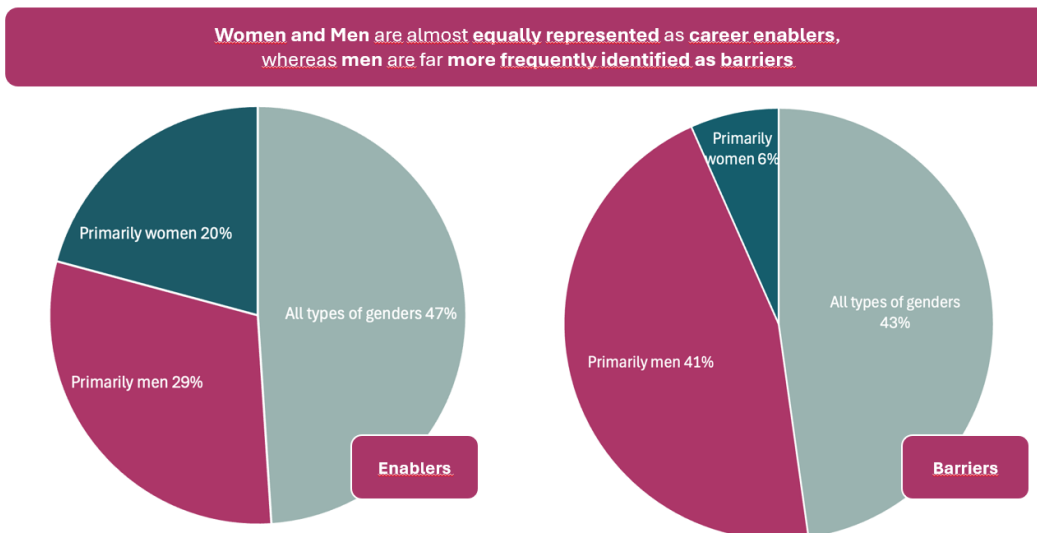


Figure 16 – Gender distribution of barriers

Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that the barriers facing women in Nordic life science are not primarily about confidence, education, or aspiration. They are about access, visibility, sponsorship, and how decisions are made when careers move closer to senior power structures.

8. Country comparisons

Although the overall Nordic pattern is consistent, the survey also reveals important national differences in when barriers emerge, what kinds of obstacles stand out, and how support structures function across the career journey.

These country-level differences matter because they indicate that the same broad challenge – women’s underrepresentation at the top – does not necessarily manifest in the same way across national ecosystems. The policy implication is straightforward: a common Nordic ambition may require differentiated responses.

Denmark

Denmark accounts for the largest share of respondents in the survey and therefore provides the most robust country picture.

Among Danish respondents, the most striking pattern is that barriers become more pronounced later in the career journey, particularly when women move into senior leadership and board-level roles.

This is strategically important. It suggests that Denmark is not facing a simple early-pipeline problem. The women represented in the survey are highly experienced, highly educated, and in many cases already established in leadership. Yet progression becomes more difficult as they move toward the most influential positions.

This later-career intensification reflects a broader Danish pattern: strong qualifications and meaningful leadership participation coexist with structural barriers to the most senior roles. According to the OECD Economic Survey of Denmark (2024), Denmark performs below the OECD average in female leadership representation – and is the only Nordic country in this position, while Sweden and Norway are above average. This positions Denmark as a clear Nordic outlier and reinforces that *the challenge is not talent supply*, but how leadership progression and access to senior roles are structured. The Danish data also indicates that lack of sponsors, scarcity of role models, lack of transparent board appointment processes, and unequal pay remain important barriers. In other words, the main challenge is not one of talent supply, it is the transition from recognised competence to recognised authority.

This reinforces a core structural point: later-career progression is shaped increasingly by informal networks, board-related visibility, prior access to senior decision-making spaces, and sponsorship from people who already hold power. Where these mechanisms are opaque or uneven, barriers accumulate.

Norway

The Norwegian respondent group is smaller, but the data still reveals a clear and distinct pattern. In Norway, barriers tend to appear earlier in the career than in Denmark but become less pronounced later.

This pattern suggests that Norwegian respondents encounter structural resistance earlier in the transition toward leadership, which may be reinforced by how career and funding pathways operate in practice.

At the same time, Norway also shows a relatively strong emphasis on professional networks and peer visibility as career enablers. This implies that network access may play an especially important role in career advancement in the Norwegian context. The Norwegian data shows that unequal pay and compensation gaps stand out strongly among reported barriers, indicating that even in a context often associated with comparatively strong equality frameworks, compensation and value recognition remain structural issues.

The Norwegian pattern therefore appears to combine two realities: barriers become visible relatively early, but the system may offer somewhat stronger relief later than in Denmark. That does not make the challenge smaller. It makes it different.

Recent structural developments in the Norwegian innovation and funding landscape may further reinforce these dynamics. Reductions in early-stage public funding, changes to commercialization grant structures, and the removal of key bridge mechanisms for long development cycles increase the importance of private capital and network-based access.

In Norway's private life science sector, women hold a minority of key decision-making roles, including approximately 13% of board chair positions and around 19% of CEO roles, despite representing a substantial share of the broader health and life science workforce. Menon Economics (October 2024). This gap between workforce representation and leadership control highlights a broader structural disconnect between where expertise resides and where strategic and financial decisions are made.

Sweden

The Swedish responses show a pattern that in some respects resembles Norway, but with an important distinction. Like Norway, Sweden shows barriers emerging earlier in the career, with lower intensity later than in Denmark. However, Sweden stands out in the survey because both career enablers and barriers peak particularly strongly in the mid-career stage.

This suggests that Swedish respondents may be experiencing comparatively more concentrated support during the stage where leadership identity and strategic visibility are built. In practical terms, this may reflect stronger leadership development support, better access to enabling networks, or more effective use of mentors, sponsors, and role models at that stage.

In fact, a 2025 report by the Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova) capturing key figures for the life science sector in Sweden particularly highlighted progress made in gender equality. While the overall gender balance in the workforce has remained broadly stable over the past decade, the share of women in senior roles has increased from 38.7% in 2015 to 46.3% in 2023. This represents a clear improvement compared with the average for Swedish limited companies, where women held 32.8% of senior positions in 2023.

At the same time, Sweden still follows the broader Nordic pattern in one decisive respect: barriers are also most visible when women move toward positions with greater authority and accountability. This is evident in the lower representation of women at the highest levels of leadership, with women holding 31% of CEO positions and 18% of chair positions.

That means Sweden may perform somewhat better in sustaining support at a critical stage, but it does not escape the wider structural challenge around senior leadership and access to top decision-making forums.

A shared Nordic pattern

Despite the national differences, the survey reveals a clear common Nordic pattern.

First, the respondent group clearly demonstrates that there is no shortage of highly qualified women within this segment of the Nordic life science sector.

Second, barriers are not evenly distributed. They become more visible where formal power, influence, and decision-making authority increase.

Third, closest leaders and top management are central to outcomes in all countries. This shows that career progression is shaped not only by individual capability, but by the behaviour of those who control access to opportunity.

Finally, the country comparisons suggest that the Nordic challenge is not simply about gender balance in the workforce. It is about how leadership systems work when careers move from competence to formal power.

9. Key conclusions

Barriers are systemic rather than exceptional

Most Nordic female leaders report experiencing career enablers. Yet approximately three out of four have also encountered barriers, which indicates that obstacles are structural rather than isolated incidents.

This is a critical distinction. If barriers were rare or incidental, the implication would be that individual organisations simply need to correct local failures. The survey points in a different

direction. It suggests that structural conditions in leadership pipelines continue to produce uneven outcomes even for highly qualified women.

Mid-career is the critical pressure point

Across all three countries, barriers most frequently emerge during mid-career stages, when women move from specialist or emerging leadership roles into positions with broader strategic responsibility.

This makes mid-career the most important pressure point in the pipeline. It is where visibility becomes more consequential, where sponsorship matters more, and where advancement begins to depend less on technical merit alone and more on access to influence, strategic assignments, and trusted networks.

Country patterns differ in timing – Denmark later, Norway and Sweden earlier – but the structural role of mid-career as a turning point is consistent across the region.

The mid-career period also often coincides with significant life-stage transitions, including family formation and care responsibilities for both children and ageing parents. While these factors are not unique to women, they often interact with existing leadership structures in ways that disproportionately affect women's career progression.

These dynamics are not solely individual challenges. They reflect how responsibilities are distributed and how organisations design leadership roles and career expectations.

Support fades as responsibility increases

The data shows that enablers are strongest in early leadership transitions and mid-level leadership roles, while barriers become more pronounced in mid-level and top leadership positions.

This suggests that support structures are more visible when women enter leadership than when they try to advance further within it. In practice, women may be welcomed into leadership pathways, but face increasing structural resistance as they move closer to roles with greater accountability, strategic influence, and formal authority.

That pattern is one of the strongest signals in the survey. It points directly to the place where organisations lose momentum in building gender-balanced leadership pipelines.

Power – and who holds it – shapes outcomes

Closest leaders and top management are identified as the primary sources of both enablers and barriers. This means the most influential career actors are also the ones most capable of opening or closing access to opportunity.

Men are more frequently identified as contributors to barriers, which likely reflects both perceived behaviours and the current distribution of senior leadership roles, while men and women appear much more evenly distributed as sources of support. This is not primarily a statement about intent. It reflects how formal power structures are currently distributed. Evidence from the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report 2024 shows that career progression is shaped not only by performance, but by access to networks, sponsorship, and visibility. When these forms of access are unevenly distributed, it directly affects who progresses into senior leadership roles.

The result is clear: the challenge is not a lack of ambition, capability, or leadership interest among women in life science. It is how career opportunities are mediated by those who control promotion, visibility, access to decision-making forums, and entry into senior leadership and governance roles. Shared networks and prior collaborations function as informal signals of credibility and risk reduction in leadership and investment decisions.

In capital-intensive segments of the life science sector, such as venture-backed innovation and company formation, access to funding introduces an additional layer to this dynamic. Decisions are not based solely on scientific merit or formal qualifications, but also on perceived credibility, prior relationships, and network proximity. A newly published report from the UK BioIndustry Association highlights that access to capital and leadership opportunities is closely linked to prior track records, visibility, and credibility within investment communities (UK BioIndustry Association, 2026).

For professionals without access to these networks, progression into founder roles, board positions, or investment-backed leadership becomes significantly more difficult. Where such early access is limited, professionals may spend disproportionate time establishing credibility rather than advancing innovation or leadership scope.

This reinforces the central finding of the report: access to power – whether organisational or financial – is mediated through structures that extend beyond formal evaluation criteria. Progression is not determined by competence alone, but by proximity to decision-making power. The talent exists, but the system does not consistently support the development of talent into senior leadership.

Taken together, the findings support a strong and practical conclusion.

The Nordic life science sector already has a deep bench of experienced, highly educated female talent. The issue is not pipeline at the level of qualifications. The issue is conversion: how many of those qualified leaders are systematically enabled to move into the highest levels of organisational power.

That is why the problem must be understood as a leadership systems issue, not as a talent issue.

10. Recommendations

The survey findings point toward a practical agenda for organisations, boards, and leaders who want to strengthen leadership diversity in the Nordic life science sector. The recommendations below are inspired both by the survey results and by the WiLD and VILDA recommendations framework.

Recommendations for companies and executive teams

1. Make career paths transparent

Define clear criteria for promotion, succession, and leadership roles.

Where leadership progression depends too heavily on informal networks, subjective assessments, or assumptions about “readiness,” structural bias is more likely to persist. Companies should establish explicit expectations for advancement and make those expectations visible.

This is particularly important at the transition from mid-level to senior leadership, where the survey shows barriers become most pronounced.

2. Measure what leadership says matters

Track representation and progression systematically across:

- Leadership levels
- Promotions
- Compensation
- Attrition
- Access to strategic roles
- Board pipelines.

Data should not sit in annual reports without consequence. It should be used actively in leadership and talent decisions.

If organisations say diversity matters but do not track how careers progress, then the issue remains rhetorical rather than operational.

3. Separate potential from availability

A recurring structural risk is that flexibility, mobility, or conformity to traditional leadership patterns are treated as proxies for leadership potential.

Companies should avoid equating constant availability with leadership suitability. Leadership roles and talent models should be designed to accommodate different life stages and career configurations without penalising ambition.

4. Formalise sponsorship — not just mentoring

The survey clearly shows that sponsorship matters. Advice is useful, but sponsorship changes careers.

Organisations should make sponsorship an explicit leadership responsibility. Senior leaders should be expected to actively recommend, elevate, and back high-potential talent for strategic assignments, leadership roles, and visible opportunities.

This should be measured as part of leadership performance, not treated as optional goodwill.

5. Open decision-making spaces intentionally

Create deliberate access to strategic projects, P&L roles, investment discussions, and leadership forums.

The survey shows that limited access to decision-making forums remains a major barrier. That matters because careers are not built only through titles. They are built through exposure to decisions, visibility in key arenas, and credibility in strategic work.

If women are not consistently present in those spaces, later promotion gaps will continue.

6. Link leadership diversity to innovation and investment priorities

Ensure that leadership diversity is reflected not only in organisational structure, but in how R&D priorities, partnerships, and investment decisions are made.

Organisations should regularly assess whether their innovation portfolios, clinical focus areas, and strategic investments reflect the needs of the full population they serve. Where gaps exist – such as in women’s health or under-researched conditions – these should be treated as strategic opportunities rather than niche topics.

Recommendations for boards and nomination committees

7. Broaden the board candidate pool

Boards should reconsider traditional recruitment criteria, particularly rigid expectations around prior CEO experience.

If board appointments continue to rely on narrow definitions of leadership legitimacy, the candidate pool will remain unnecessarily restricted. Boards should instead ask which competences are most relevant to the board’s actual work.

8. Use more independent and transparent recruitment processes

Board appointments should not depend solely on existing board networks. Nomination processes should be more structured, more transparent, and less dependent on closed circles of prior collaboration.

This is especially relevant given the survey findings on lack of transparent board appointment processes and the broader role of network access in leadership progression.

9. Strengthen the long-term board pipeline

Boards should not treat diversity as a late-stage recruitment issue. They should support stronger leadership pipelines by encouraging broader development of senior female talent within the organisations they oversee.

10. Ensure diversity in capital and decision-making committees

Representation should extend beyond boards to include investment committees, capital allocation forums, innovation boards, and strategic funding bodies.

These groups play a critical role in determining which projects, partnerships, and ventures receive resources. Without diverse representation at this level, organisations risk reinforcing existing patterns in both leadership and innovation outcomes.

Recommendations for individual leaders

11. Become bias-aware and act on it

Leaders should educate themselves about how bias influences hiring, promotion, project allocation, and perceptions of readiness.

Awareness alone is insufficient. Leaders must intervene when they see biased patterns shaping decisions and outcomes.

12. Challenge the criteria, not the individuals

When discussing who is “ready,” “strategic,” or “a good fit,” leaders should ask what those judgments are actually based on.

Vague concepts often hide structural bias. Better decisions come from clearer criteria.

13. Use your position to create access and sponsorship

Leaders should actively sponsor talent by recommending individuals for roles, projects, speaking opportunities, and board positions. This includes opening access to decision-making spaces, sharing visibility, and backing talent publicly.

Many careers do not stall because of lack of competence, but because access to opportunity is not actively enabled by those in positions of influence.

Recommendations for the Nordic life science ecosystem more broadly

14. Treat leadership diversity as an ecosystem competitiveness issue

The life science sector is too strategically important to leave leadership diversity to isolated initiatives inside individual organisations.

Industry bodies, networks, investors, and ecosystem actors should recognise that leadership diversity is linked to talent utilisation, innovation quality, and long-term competitiveness.

15. Strengthen cross-sector visibility and access to leadership, governance, and capital

Networks such as WiLD Denmark, WiLD Norway, and VILDA play an important role by making leadership talent visible across organisational boundaries.

This function should be further strengthened to connect talent to executive roles, board positions, investment environments, and strategic partnerships across the Nordic ecosystem.

16. Increase transparency and accessibility in capital allocation

Investors, funds, and public financing bodies should track and disclose data on capital allocation, including founder gender, leadership composition, and funding stages.

At the same time, funding mechanisms should be designed to support first-time founders and research-intensive ventures, reducing overreliance on prior entrepreneurial track records and closed investment networks.

17. Align leadership, capital, and research priorities

Sustainable change requires alignment between who leads, who allocates capital, and what is prioritised in research and innovation.

Efforts to improve leadership diversity will have limited impact unless they are connected to how funding decisions are made and which areas of science receive sustained investment.

Closing reflection

The findings of this report point to a clear conclusion: the challenge is not a lack of talent, ambition, or capability among women in Nordic life sciences. It is how access to leadership, influence, and decision-making is structured.

This has implications beyond representation. Leadership shapes which scientific questions are prioritised, which innovations are funded, and how effectively the sector responds to evolving healthcare needs. When access to these positions is uneven, the consequences are reflected not only in careers, but in innovation outcomes and societal impact.

The Nordic life science sector is built on a strong foundation of talent, collaboration, and public trust. Realising its full potential requires that leadership systems – across organisations, investment environments, and policy frameworks – make better use of that talent.

The opportunity is therefore clear: to move from recognising the gap to addressing the structures that sustain it.

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