



PMW Insight Report

Understanding Career
Progression Among
Professional Migrant Women
in Australia



August 2026
By Lina Orozco Múnera



An Insights Report by Professional Migrant Women

"I've been told to 'put myself forward more' —but no one tells me how—."

Survey Participant 2025.

Citation

Please cite this report as

Published by: Professional Migrant Women (PMW),
Melbourne, Australia | July 2026

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About PMW

Professional Migrant Women (PMW) is a social enterprise dedicated to empowering skilled migrant women to thrive professionally in Australia. Through leadership programs, mentoring, professional development and community initiatives, PMW supports women to build meaningful careers while advocating for greater equity, inclusion and representation across Australian workplaces.

Learn more at professionalmigrantwomen.com.au

About the Author

Lina Orozco Múnera is Director of Strategy and Growth at Professional Migrant Women (PMW) and the author of this report. She led the design, delivery and analysis of this research as part of PMW's commitment to strengthening the evidence base on the career progression of professional migrant women in Australia.



Understanding Career Progression

An Insights Report by Professional Migrant Women

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Acknowledgements

Professional Migrant Women (PMW) would like to thank every woman who shared her time, experiences and reflections through the Career Progression Survey and focus group. Your openness and willingness to share your experiences made this research possible.

We also acknowledge the PMW volunteers and community members whose ongoing work, conversations and commitment over the past six years have helped shape our understanding of the career progression experiences of professional migrant women in Australia.

Recognitions

This report was designed by **Juliana Ochoa**, who generously volunteered her time and creative expertise to bring these findings to life. We are sincerely grateful for her contribution to this publication.

Acknowledgements of Country

Professional Migrant Women (PMW) acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands of Wurundjeri Country on which this research was conducted and where our community lives and works across Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise the enduring connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country, culture and community.



Executive Summary

Professional migrant women make a significant contribution to Australia's workforce, bringing international experience, specialised skills and diverse perspectives across a wide range of industries. While considerable attention has been given to supporting migrant women into employment, much less is understood about what happens after they secure a professional role.

To better understand this stage of the professional journey, Professional Migrant Women (PMW) conducted a national survey of 185 professional migrant women and a focus group with eight women who had successfully progressed into senior, leadership, founder or specialist roles across Australia. This report brings together those findings to explore the experiences, barriers and supports that shape career progression.

The findings paint a consistent picture.

Participants were not at the beginning of their careers. Most were already employed in professional roles, many had accumulated years of Australian work experience, and nearly half had more than seven years of professional experience in Australia. Despite this, 40.5% of respondents employed in professional roles described themselves as underemployed, suggesting that workforce participation does not necessarily translate into career progression.

Rather than identifying one dominant barrier, participants described career progression as being influenced by several interconnected factors. The most frequently reported themes included unclear career progression pathways (41.6%), lack of mentorship or sponsorship (31.9%), workplace bias (31.4%), confidence and self-advocacy (31.4%), and limited professional networks (30.3%). Together, these findings suggest that career progression is shaped by a combination of organisational, relational and individual factors rather than a single obstacle.

The focus group provided additional insight into how women who had successfully progressed navigated these challenges. Despite representing different industries and career pathways, participants consistently reflected on the importance of building strategic relationships, increasing their visibility, advocating for themselves, continuing to learn, and taking intentional action towards their career goals.

The survey also explored the types of support participants believed would make the greatest difference to their career progression. Rather than seeking a single solution, respondents consistently identified practical, career-focused support, including personalised career coaching (49.7%), networking opportunities with senior leaders (49.7%), visibility opportunities (48.1%),

executive mentorship or sponsorship (45.4%), and leadership development (44.3%).

Taken together, these findings point to a stage of the professional journey that receives comparatively little attention. While significant effort has been directed towards supporting skilled migrant women into employment, this research suggests there is also value in understanding what happens after workforce entry—how professional migrant women navigate progression, leadership opportunities and long-term career development.

By sharing these findings, PMW hopes to contribute to a growing evidence base on the career progression of professional migrant women in Australia and support more informed conversations among employers, policymakers, researchers and community organisations committed to building more equitable career pathways.



Introduction

Professional migrant women contribute significant knowledge, experience, and global perspectives to Australia's workforce. Many have successfully established professional careers after navigating the challenges of migration, rebuilding networks, and adapting to a new labour market. Yet for many, securing a professional role is not the end of the journey, it is the beginning of a new challenge: progressing their careers.

While considerable research and investment have focused on supporting migrant women into employment, far less attention has been given to understanding their experiences once they are established in professional roles. Questions around career progression, leadership pathways, workplace recognition, and access to influential networks remain comparatively underexplored.

To better understand these experiences, Professional Migrant Women (PMW) conducted a national survey in 2025 of 185 professional migrant women living and working in Australia, complemented by a focus group with eight women who had successfully progressed into senior leadership roles across a range of industries.

This report brings together those quantitative and qualitative findings to better understand:

- the career progression experiences of professional migrant women;
- the barriers participants perceive as limiting career advancement;
- the strategies women describe as supporting progression; and
- the types of support participants believe would have the greatest impact.

Throughout this report, survey findings provide an overview of patterns observed within the participant sample, while focus group discussions offer deeper insight into how women experienced and navigated career progression. Where relevant, selected Australian research is referenced to provide context and identify areas of alignment with broader evidence.

This report does not seek to represent the experiences of all professional migrant women in Australia. Rather, it presents the perspectives of the women who participated in this research and offers evidence that contributes to a broader conversation about career progression, leadership, and inclusion in Australian workplaces.

By sharing these findings publicly, PMW hopes to contribute practical evidence that informs employers, policymakers, researchers, and organisations working to create more equitable career progression opportunities for professional migrant women.

Research Objectives

Professional Migrant Women (PMW) undertook this research to better understand the career progression experiences of professional migrant women living and working in Australia. While many participants had already established professional careers, PMW sought to explore the factors influencing their ability to progress into more senior, strategic, and leadership roles.

This research was guided by four key questions:

What are the career progression **experiences** of professional migrant women in Australia?

What **factors** do participants perceive as influencing their career progression?

What **strategies and supports** do women identify as enabling career advancement?

What broader **patterns** emerge from these findings?

The findings from this research also informed the design of PMW's ASCEND pilot program 2026, an evidence-informed career progression initiative developed to respond to the experiences and needs identified by participants. While ASCEND is referenced throughout this report where relevant, the primary purpose of this publication is to present the research findings themselves.

How to Read this Report

This report combines evidence from two complementary sources:

- **A national survey** of 185 professional migrant women living and working in Australia, which provides quantitative insights into participants' career experiences, perceived barriers, and support needs.
- **A focus group** of eight professional migrant women who had progressed into senior leadership roles across diverse industries. The focus group provides qualitative insight into the experiences, strategies, and reflections of women who have successfully navigated career progression.

Throughout the report, survey findings identify patterns across the participant group, while focus group discussions provide deeper context by exploring how women experienced those challenges and the approaches they found most valuable in progressing their careers.

The first four insights present the evidence gathered through this research. The final section, Looking Across the Evidence, brings these findings together, identifies the broader patterns that emerged across both research methods, and considers how they align with existing Australian research.

Where relevant, selected Australian studies are referenced to provide additional context. These references are intended to complement—not replace—the findings presented by participants in this research.

Unless otherwise stated, all percentages reported throughout this publication are based on responses from the Career Progression Survey conducted by Professional Migrant Women in 2025.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research to better understand the career progression experiences of professional migrant women in Australia.

Data was collected through a national online survey and a focus group conducted between March and July 2025.

Survey

An online survey was distributed through Professional Migrant Women's national community and professional networks. **A total of 185 professional migrant women** from across Australia completed the survey.

The survey collected information on participants' demographic characteristics, employment situation, career aspirations, perceived barriers to career progression, actions already taken to advance their careers, and the types of support they believed would be most valuable.

Survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, with open-text responses reviewed to identify recurring themes that provided additional context to the quantitative findings.

Focus Group

To complement the survey findings, PMW conducted a focus group with eight professional migrant women from Melbourne, Sydney, and Adelaide who had progressed into senior leadership roles across a range of industries.

Participants represented diverse professional backgrounds, including engineering, construction, design, sustainability, coaching, and diversity, equity and inclusion. The discussion explored the factors participants believed had enabled their career progression, the barriers they encountered, and the practical strategies they considered most valuable.

The discussion was analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights.

Limitations

This research was designed to understand the experiences of the women who chose to participate and does not claim to be statistically representative of all professional migrant women in Australia.

As participation was voluntary, the findings may reflect the perspectives of women who were more engaged with professional development or who had stronger views about career progression. Additionally, survey responses capture participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions at a single point in time.

Despite these limitations, the consistency of themes across both the survey and focus group provides confidence that the findings offer meaningful insight into the career progression experiences of many professional migrant women. These findings also align closely with the experiences and stories shared by members of PMW's community through six years of events, professional development programs, mentoring initiatives, and community engagement. While these broader organisational observations were not systematically collected as part of this research, they provide additional context for understanding why these findings resonated so strongly within PMW's community.

Who Participated?

Survey Respondents

A total of 185 professional migrant women completed the Career Progression Survey between March and July 2025. Participants represented a diverse group of skilled professionals at different stages of their careers, with most already established in the Australian workforce.

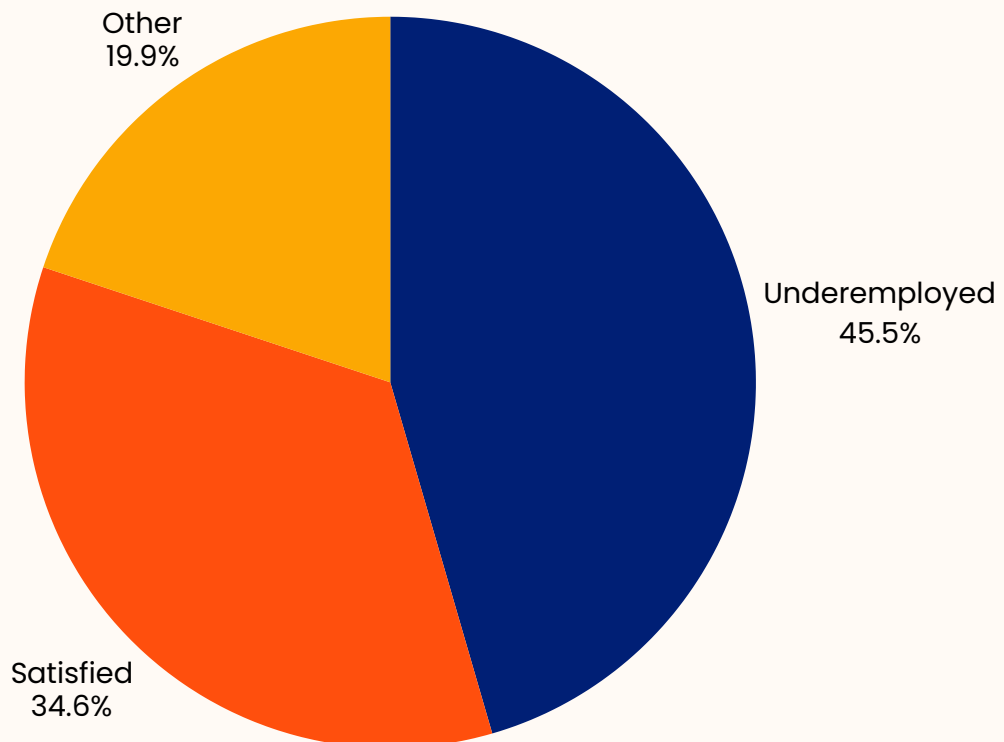
Employment

More than three-quarters of respondents (76%, n = 139) were employed in professional roles at the time of the survey. However, employment did not necessarily equate to career satisfaction or progression. Among those employed professionally:

- 40.5% (n = 75) reported feeling underemployed or below their potential.
- 34.6% (n = 64) reported being satisfied with their current role.

The remaining respondents were studying, seeking employment, self-employed, or transitioning between roles.

Career progression satisfaction



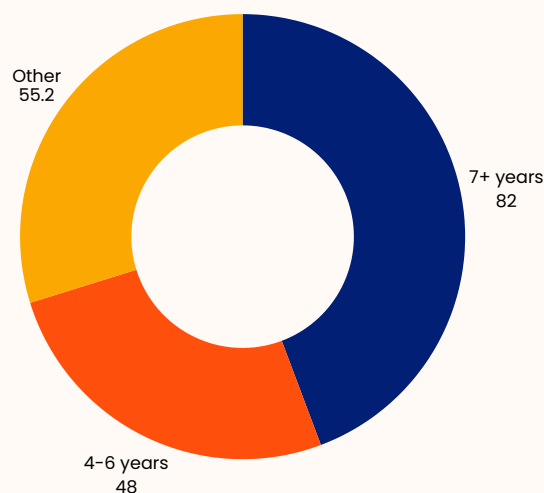
Professional Experience

This was a highly experienced cohort.

Nearly half of respondents (44.3%) had more than seven years of professional experience in Australia, while a further 25.9% had between four and six years' experience. Almost 40% had lived in Australia for more than 11 years.

These findings suggest that many participants had already established themselves professionally and were seeking to progress their careers rather than enter the workforce for the first time.

Years of professional experience for participants

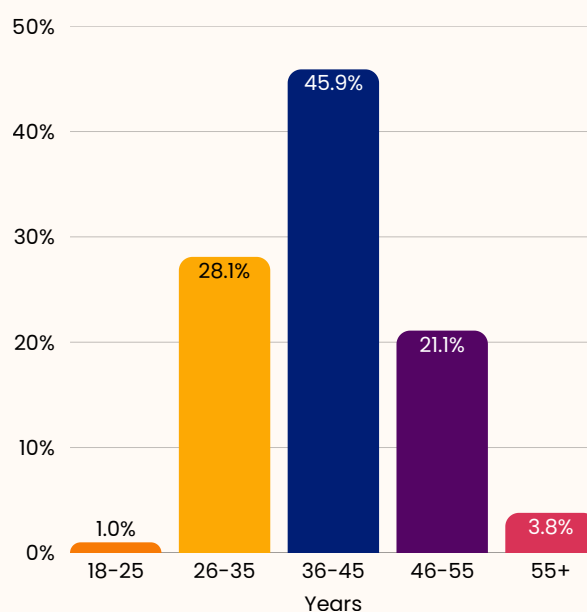


Age Profile

Respondents were predominantly in the mid-career stage of their working lives.

- 45.9% were aged 36–45 years
- 28.1% were aged 26–35 years
- 21.1% were aged 46–55 years
- 3.8% were aged 55 years and over
- Only one respondent was aged 25 years or younger.

Participants Ages



Focus Group Participants

To complement the survey findings, PMW conducted a focus group with eight professional migrant women from Melbourne, Sydney, and Adelaide. Participants were intentionally selected because they were working in senior, leadership, founder, or specialist roles and could reflect on the experiences, decisions, and strategies that had supported their career progression.

The group represented a diverse range of industries, including engineering, construction, sustainability, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), graphic design, and life coaching. Participants also reflected a broad range of life stages and professional journeys, ranging from early-career leaders to professionals with more than 50 years of experience in the Australian workforce.

Most participants held postgraduate qualifications, and together they brought experience across corporate, consulting, self-employed, and entrepreneurial career pathways. Their diverse perspectives provided valuable insight into the common enablers of career progression, despite differences in industry, career path, and personal circumstances.

Rather than seeking to represent all professional migrant women, the focus group was designed to deepen understanding of how women who had successfully progressed into senior roles navigated their careers, the barriers they encountered along the way, and the strategies they believed made the greatest difference.

Insights

Insight 1: Career progression challenges persist well beyond workforce entry

"I got an excellent performance review but was overlooked again." — Survey participant

A common assumption is that once migrant women secure professional employment, the most significant barriers are behind them. However, the experiences shared by participants in this study suggest that career progression presents a distinct stage of the professional journey.

The women who participated in this research were, by and large, experienced professionals. More than three-quarters (76%) were employed in professional roles, almost half (44.3%) had accumulated more than seven years of professional experience in Australia, and nearly 40% had lived in the country for more than a decade.

Despite these indicators of workforce participation and experience, **40.5% of respondents employed in professional roles described themselves as underemployed**, suggesting that securing professional employment does not necessarily translate into career progression or career satisfaction.

This finding was reinforced through the focus group. Participants—who had progressed into senior, leadership, founder or specialist roles—reflected that advancement had rarely been automatic. Instead, many described **career progression as requiring years of intentional learning, self-advocacy, relationship building, and navigating workplace dynamics** before opportunities began to emerge.

As one participant reflected:

"Visibility isn't about ego—it's about value."

Together, these findings provide context for the remaining insights in this report, which explore participants' experiences of career progression after entering the Australian workforce.

Key Insight

Securing professional employment does not necessarily lead to career progression. Many participants were experienced professionals who continued to face challenges advancing their careers.

At a glance

- 76% of respondents were employed in professional roles.
- 44.3% had more than seven years of professional experience in Australia.
- Nearly 40% had lived in Australia for 11 years or more.
- Despite this, 40.5% of respondents employed in professional roles described themselves as underemployed.

Insight 2: Recurring themes influencing career progression

"I've been told to 'put myself forward more'—but no one tells me how." — Survey participant

The survey did not identify a single dominant barrier to career progression. Instead, participants reported several recurring themes with similar frequency. These themes are explored further below.

Rather than pointing to one defining challenge, participants' responses suggest that career progression is influenced by multiple experiences that often occur together.

Unclear career progression pathways emerged as the most frequently reported theme, with **41.6% of respondents** indicating they were **uncertain about what was required to progress into more senior roles**. Many participants described a lack of transparency around promotion processes and uncertainty about how career advancement decisions were made.

"There's no transparency in what it takes to move up."

While the focus group was designed to explore career success rather than barriers, participants frequently reflected on **the importance of intentionally mapping career pathways, identifying decision-makers, and seeking guidance** to better understand how progression occurred within their organisations.

A lack of mentorship or sponsorship was identified by 31.9% of respondents. Participants described wanting more than advice—they wanted access to people who could provide guidance, advocate for their work, and help them navigate organisational systems.

"A mentor is nice. A sponsor can change your life."

Women in the focus group similarly **described mentors, coaches and sponsors as playing an important role** in helping them build confidence, increase their visibility, and navigate opportunities for progression.

Workplace bias was identified by 31.4% of respondents. Participants described experiences where their cultural background, accent, or perceived lack of local experience influenced how they were viewed or considered for opportunities.

"I feel I am discriminated against because of my non-native English."

"Not having local working experience (despite having it!)."

Although the focus group was not centred on discrimination, participants reflected on learning to navigate workplace cultures, challenge assumptions, and reframe aspects of their identity—such as their accent or international experience—as professional strengths.

Confidence and self-advocacy skills were also identified by 31.4% of respondents as influencing career progression. Participants described challenges in communicating their value, advocating for themselves, and putting themselves forward for opportunities.

Focus group participants offered a complementary perspective, describing confidence as **something they developed over time through experience, mentoring and repeated practice**, rather than something they either possessed or lacked.

Finally, 30.3% of respondents identified a limited professional network as a barrier to career progression. Many participants described wanting stronger connections with leaders, decision-makers and peers who could support their professional growth.

The focus group reinforced that career progression was often supported by intentionally building relationships rather than relying solely on technical capability.

"I started networking more strategically."

Key Insight

Career progression was not shaped by one dominant barrier, but by a combination of interconnected factors that participants experienced throughout their professional journey.

At a glance

- 41.6% identified unclear career progression pathways as a barrier.
- 31.9% identified lack of mentorship or sponsorship.
- 31.4% identified workplace bias.

Insight 3: Career progression can be learned and intentionally developed

"Doing it scared anyway." — Focus group participant

Unlike the previous insight, which explored the barriers participants experienced, this insight focuses on the reflections of women who had successfully progressed into senior, leadership, founder or specialist roles.

Women who had progressed into senior, leadership, founder or specialist roles consistently described similar strategies that supported their career progression.

The most commonly discussed enablers included:

- Building strategic relationships with mentors, sponsors and decision-makers.
- Increasing their visibility by sharing their work and expertise.
- Advocating for themselves and communicating their value.
- Continuing to develop new skills and seek opportunities to learn.
- Taking intentional steps towards career goals, even when outcomes were uncertain.

While participants came from different industries, cities and career pathways, their reflections highlighted striking similarities in how they approached career progression.

Many described intentionally building relationships that extended beyond traditional networking. Rather than simply expanding their professional contacts, they focused on developing meaningful relationships with people who could challenge them, advocate for them, or help them navigate organisational systems.

Focus group participants also described learning to become more visible within their organisations. This was not framed as self-promotion, but as ensuring that their work, expertise and contributions were recognised by others.

Several women reflected that confidence developed gradually through experience rather than arriving before taking action.

Instead of waiting until they felt completely ready, they described accepting uncertainty as a natural part of career progression.

Others highlighted the importance of continuous learning, deliberately developing expertise, and becoming recognised for a particular strength or area of knowledge.

"Be the go-to person for one thing."

Across the discussion, participants consistently described career progression as an active process that required intentional decisions, experimentation, and persistence rather than a series of opportunities that emerged automatically.

Key Insight

Women who had progressed into senior roles consistently described career progression as an intentional process supported by strategic relationships, continuous learning, visibility and self-advocacy.

Insight 4: What support are professional migrant women seeking?

"Real-life examples, not theory—tell me what actually works." — Survey participant

Participants were asked what types of support they believed would have the greatest impact on their career progression. Their responses consistently pointed towards practical, career-focused support that would help them navigate the realities of progressing within Australian workplaces.

Rather than seeking a single solution, participants identified a range of complementary supports that would strengthen their ability to advance their careers.

The support survey participants said would make the greatest difference to their career progression:

CAREER COACHING AND PERSONALISED CAREER STRATEGY

49.7%

Support to develop clear career plans, identify opportunities, and navigate career decisions.



NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES WITH SENIOR LEADERS

49.7%

Meaningful opportunities to connect with decision-makers, industry leaders and influential professionals.



44.3%

LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Programs focused on developing leadership capability, confidence and workplace influence.

48.1%

VISIBILITY OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities to increase professional visibility through speaking engagements, publications, leadership opportunities and showcasing expertise.



36.2%

CAREER ADVANCEMENT SUPPORT

Practical guidance to progress into more senior roles, including understanding promotion pathways and preparing for advancement opportunities.

30.8% PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

Workshops to strengthen practical workplace skills and support ongoing professional growth.



EXECUTIVE MENTORSHIP OR SPONSORSHIP

45.4%

Access to experienced leaders who can provide guidance, advocate for opportunities and help navigate organisational systems.



What participants said:

"More than just networking—it's about who you get connected to."

"Workshops on personal branding, public speaking, and managing up."

"Real-life examples, not theory—tell me what actually works."

Key Insight

Participants were not looking for a single solution—they identified practical, career-focused support that could help them navigate progression more effectively.

Looking Across the Evidence

The findings presented throughout this report paint a consistent picture. While participants' experiences varied depending on their industry, profession, career stage and personal circumstances, several broader patterns emerged when the survey and focus group findings were considered together.

One of the clearest patterns emerging from this research is that career progression represents a distinct stage of the professional journey. Most participants had already established themselves in the Australian workforce: they were employed in professional roles, had accumulated local work experience, and had demonstrated a clear commitment to developing their careers. Yet many continued to describe challenges progressing into more senior or influential positions.

Another important finding was that no single barrier emerged as the defining challenge. Instead, participants described career progression as being shaped by a combination of factors, including understanding career pathways, accessing mentors and sponsors, navigating workplace bias, building professional networks, and developing confidence and self-advocacy. The relatively similar frequency with which these themes were reported suggests that career progression is influenced by multiple, interconnected experiences rather than one dominant obstacle.

Finally, participants were not simply identifying barriers—they were also identifying solutions. The support they sought was overwhelmingly practical and career-focused, including personalised career coaching, networking opportunities with senior leaders, visibility initiatives, mentorship and sponsorship, and leadership development. Together, these findings suggest that participants were looking for greater access to opportunities, relationships and knowledge that could help them navigate career progression more effectively.

Importantly, these findings are broadly consistent with other Australian research. The Women of Colour Australia Workplace Report (2024) similarly found that women of colour continue to experience barriers to career progression, workplace bias and exclusion despite their qualifications and professional experience. The Activate Her Skills Report (2026) likewise highlights the underutilisation of skilled migrant women within Australia's workforce, suggesting that employment alone does not necessarily lead to full participation or career advancement.

Although this report focuses on career progression rather than recruitment,

participants' reflections on workplace bias also sit within a broader Australian context. Research from Monash University found that job applicants with English-sounding names received significantly more interview callbacks than applicants with ethnic-sounding names. While that study examined recruitment rather than advancement, it provides additional context for understanding why some participants continued to perceive their cultural background, accent or international experience as influencing workplace opportunities.

Taken together, these findings point to an area of the professional journey that appears to receive comparatively little attention. While considerable effort has been directed towards supporting skilled migrant women into employment, this research suggests there is also value in understanding what happens after workforce entry—how professional migrant women navigate progression, leadership opportunities, workplace influence and long-term career development.

At Professional Migrant Women, this pattern reflects what we have observed through six years of working alongside professional migrant women across Australia. Through community events, mentoring initiatives, leadership programs and professional development opportunities, women have consistently shared experiences that closely mirror the findings presented in this report. While these broader organisational observations were not systematically collected as part of this research, they provide additional context for understanding why these findings resonated so strongly within PMW's community.

This convergence of formal research and community experience has informed PMW's understanding of what we describe as the 'missing middle': the stage between entering professional employment and progressing into more senior and influential roles, where many professional migrant women continue to seek clearer pathways, stronger professional relationships and greater opportunities to realise their full potential.

The findings from this research informed the design of PMW's ASCEND pilot program, which was developed to respond to the needs and experiences identified by participants. A companion report will explore the outcomes and learnings from that program.

Key Insight

Together, these findings suggest that career progression is a distinct stage of the professional journey—one that deserves greater attention from employers, policymakers, researchers and organisations supporting professional migrant women.

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