

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP
JOURNEYS IN **AGRI-FOOD**

NOVEMBER 2025



ABOUT ECO CANADA

Environmental Careers Organization of Canada (ECO Canada) is a not-for-profit corporation established in 1992 as part of Canada's Sector Council Initiative. ECO Canada is focused on identifying, communicating, and meeting the needs of environmental practitioners, employers, educators, and students. Its vision is to build the world's leading environmental workforce.

ECO Canada has supported Canada's environmental workforce by establishing professional development resources, training programs, and educational partnerships, conducting in-depth labour market research and providing the largest industry-specific job board.

ECO Canada's programs and services are developed through strong national partnerships, consultative strategic planning, and ongoing labour market research. Its labour market research provides valuable insights into environmental career trends, which can be used by governments, educators, youth, and industry partners to make decisions and formulate strategies. To learn more, please visit www.eco.ca.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study has been funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada. We are greatly appreciative of the support.



We also thank Forum Research for their assistance with the survey.

DISCLAIMER

Copyright © 2025 ECO Canada

All rights reserved. The information and projections contained herein have been prepared with data sources ECO Canada has deemed to be reliable. ECO Canada makes no representations or warranties that its compensation guide is error-free and therefore shall not be liable for any financial or other losses or damages of any nature whatsoever arising from or otherwise relating to any use of its information.

The use of any part of this publication is subject to the Copyright Act. The content may be referenced for general, educational, or media purposes with the following citation: Source (or "adapted from"): ECO Canada. (2025). www.eco.ca.

For comments or questions, contact: research@eco.ca

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About ECO Canada	2
Acknowledgements	3
Disclaimer	3
Executive Summary	5
Key Findings	6
Key Takeaways	7
Introduction	8
Economic and Labour Trends	8
Technology and Regulation	9
Snapshot: Agri-Food by the Numbers	10
Gender Diversity in Agri-Food Sectors	11
Snapshot: Who We Heard From	12
How Satisfied Are They With Their Careers?	13
Satisfaction with Opportunities for Career Advancement by Seniority	14
Satisfaction with Access to Mentorship or Role Models by Seniority	15
Satisfaction with Recognition of Contributions by Seniority	16
Satisfaction with Work-Life Balance by Seniority	17
Snapshot: Helpful Resources and Tools	18
What Has Helped Them Succeed in Their Workplace?	19
Snapshot: Stretch Assignments as Opportunities for Growth	21
What Barriers to Advancement Do They Encounter?	22
Work-life Balance Issues	23
Limited Access to Training or Professional Development	25
Physical or Safety Challenges	27
Lack of Mentorship or Sponsorship	29
Gender Bias or Discrimination	31
Snapshot: How Prevalent Are Gender Equity Policies in Agri-Food?	32
How Many of Them Experience Workplace Gender Inequality?	33
Unequal Pay for Equal Work	33
Exclusion from Decision-Making Opportunities	34
Dismissal of Ideas or Contributions	35
Lack of Diversity in Senior Leadership Roles	36
Gender Harassment or Inappropriate Behaviour in the Workplace	37
What Would They Change to Make Their Workplace More Gender Inclusive?	38
How Would Addressing Systemic Barriers Impact Their Career Growth?	40
Conclusion	41
References	42

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The agri-food sector is a cornerstone of Canada's economy, employing a diverse workforce across food production, processing, distribution, and retail. Women, transgender, and non-binary individuals represent nearly half (47%) of this workforce, contributing to innovation, leadership, and resilience throughout the value chain.

To better understand their workplace experiences, challenges, and career development needs, we surveyed 161 individuals in Canada's agri-food sector who identify as women, transgender, or non-binary in February 2025. The findings shed light on satisfaction, barriers to advancement, and opportunities for creating more equitable, inclusive, and supportive workplaces.



Key Findings

1	Career Satisfaction	Over two-thirds of respondents reported being satisfied with their career progression, mentorship, recognition, and work-life balance. Satisfaction generally increased with seniority.
2	Advancement & Mentorship Gaps	Perceptions of career advancement and mentorship vary by seniority. Entry-level employees and directors report the highest satisfaction, while junior- and mid-level staff are less satisfied. Mentorship is generally valued, though dissatisfaction is highest at the junior level and neutrality rises among higher levels, including executives. These findings highlight opportunities to strengthen development and mentorship for mid- and senior-level employees to support engagement and career growth.
3	Employee Recognition and Work-Life Balance	Executives and senior staff report the highest recognition, while junior-level employees show the most dissatisfaction and neutrality, highlighting a need to better acknowledge their contributions. Work-life balance is generally positive, though junior-level staff again report the highest dissatisfaction, suggesting targeted support could improve engagement and well-being.
4	Helpful Resources and Tools	Respondents highlighted flexible work arrangements and leadership training as the most used and most helpful resources for advancing their careers.
5	Stretch Assignments	Only 37% of respondents reported receiving high-profile or challenging assignments. These opportunities are essential for building leadership skills and positioning employees for promotions.
6	Positive Workplace Supports	About half of respondents reported positive experiences that supported their success, with training, mentorship, job shadowing, teamwork, and managerial support cited most frequently.
7	Barriers to Advancement	Among those who reported gender-related barriers, key challenges included limited access to training and physical or safety concerns (25%), work-life balance issues (23%), gender bias or discrimination (15%), and lack of mentorship (9%).
8	Equity Issues in the Workplace	More than one-third of respondents reported experiencing workplace inequities, including unequal pay for equal work (35%), exclusion from decision-making opportunities (36%), dismissal of ideas or contributions (34%), and a lack of diversity in senior leadership roles (35%). Three in ten respondents (30%) experienced gender harassment or inappropriate behaviour, highlighting persistent challenges in equity and inclusion across the workplace.
9	Workplace Gender Equity Policies	While over two-thirds (68%) of respondents report that gender equity policies exist, more than one in five (22%) find them absent or unclear.
10	What Workers Want to Change	Respondents prioritized improvements to make workplaces more gender inclusive, focusing on equitable hiring and promotions, inclusive and respectful cultures, expanded training and mentorship, stronger gender equity policies, pay equity, and flexible, family-friendly work arrangements.
11	Impact of Addressing Systemic Barriers	About a quarter of respondents said addressing systemic barriers would support their career growth. Suggested impacts included greater advancement opportunities, improved well-being, a more inclusive culture, fairer promotions, better work-life balance, and equitable pay.

Key Takeaways

1	Advancement & Mentorship Gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entry-level employees and directors report the highest satisfaction with career advancement, while junior- and mid-level staff are less satisfied. • Mentorship is valued but dissatisfaction peaks at the junior level; neutrality rises among higher levels, including executives.
2	Recognition & Work-Life Balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executives and senior staff feel most recognized; junior staff show the most dissatisfaction and neutrality. • Work-life balance is generally positive but weaker for junior-level staff, indicating targeted support could improve well-being and retention.
3	Resources & Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible work arrangements and leadership training are the most valued tools for career advancement. • Positive workplace support, including mentorship, job shadowing, teamwork, and managerial support help roughly half of respondents succeed.
4	Key Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited access to training, safety concerns, work-life balance challenges, gender bias, and lack of mentorship impede advancement. • Only about a third of employees receive high-profile assignments, limiting leadership development and promotional opportunities.
5	Equity & Systemic Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent workplace inequities exist; unequal pay, exclusion from decision-making, dismissal of ideas, lack of senior leadership diversity, and gender harassment remain significant issues. • Addressing systemic barriers, through equitable policies, inclusive culture, fair promotions, and flexible work, would enhance career growth, well-being, and inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

The agri-food sector is a critical component of the Canadian economy and has evolved to meet the demands of Canadians. As a supply chain sector, the agri-food industry includes food and beverage manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers. Many dynamics will continue to shape the agri-food sector, and its' economic contributions, for the foreseeable future.

Economic and Labour Trends

While the agri-food sector is a key sector of the Canadian economy, it is relatively small in comparison to the national picture (see [Snapshot: Agri-Food by the Numbers](#)).

Despite its economic significance, the agri-food sector faces persistent challenges in attracting and retaining a skilled workforce. Factors such as rural location, aging demographics, and the seasonality of many jobs continue to impact labour availability, affecting productivity and economic growth (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2025).

These challenges manifest in multiple practical barriers when it comes to hiring and staffing within the sector (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2024), including:

- **Recruiting diverse candidates in remote areas for physically demanding work,**
- **Gaining skilled labour with attractive yet sustainable compensation,**
- **Retaining labour to maximize investments in skill training,**
- **Adopting technology requires more training and offers uncertain return on investment and,**
- **Building capacity is limited by lack of market information, hiring human resources personnel.**



Technology and Regulation

Given the broad scope of agri-food in Canadian society, the sector is heavily influenced by government decision-making. Recent polling of agri-food stakeholders found that 62% were optimistic about the future. However, key risks identified included the policy and regulatory environment and trade barriers (Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute, 2024).

While regulatory decisions can present challenges, they also have the potential to serve as strategic enablers of innovation – especially when they provide certainty that supports proactive planning, rather than uncertainty that reinforces a reactive market (Saghafi, 2025).

Technology, by contrast, plays a dual role in the agri-food industry. Amid persistent labour shortages, it is often adopted to maintain operations, boost productivity and enhance export competitiveness. However, this adoption can also raise training costs, as existing workers must be reskilled to operate new technologies and processes (Information and Communications Technology Council, 2021).

This trade-off will be increasingly important, as research suggests that one in five food and beverage manufacturing jobs could be at risk due to automation over the next decade (Future Skills Centre, 2024).





Snapshot: Agri-Food by the Numbers

The agri-food industry includes food and beverage manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers.¹

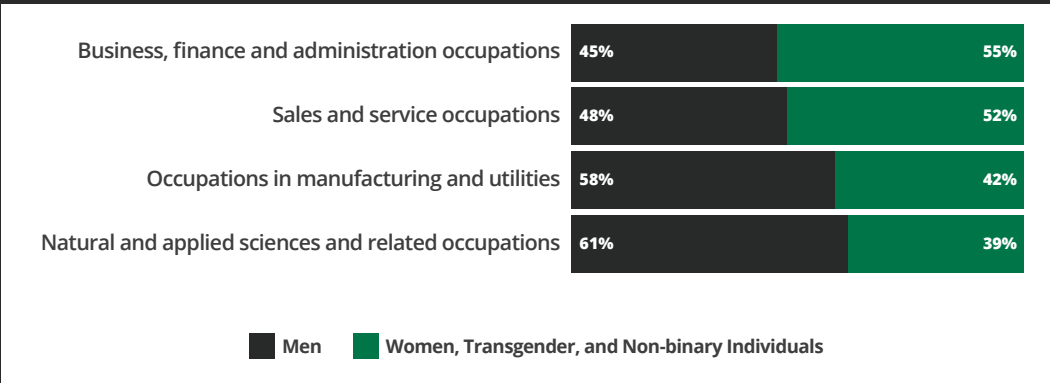
GDP: In 2024, agri-food generated \$103.9 billion in gross domestic product (GDP), equivalent to 5% of Canada’s national output (Statistics Canada, 2025a).

Employment: In 2021, roughly 895,670 individuals were employed in the agri-food sector, equivalent to 5.2% of Canada’s total employment (Statistics Canada, Custom Tabulation for ECO Canada).

Worker Demographics: In 2021, women accounted for 48% of the total national labour force and 47% of the agri-food sector labour force (Statistics Canada, Custom Tabulation for ECO Canada).

Figure 1

Gender Distribution of Employment for Top Occupations² in Agri-Food, 2021 Census



Source: Statistics Canada. 2021 Census. Custom tabulation for ECO Canada.

1 Data reported includes employment within 15 industry groups: NAICS 3111 (Animal food manufacturing), NAICS 3112 (Grain and oilseed milling), NAICS 3113 (Sugar and confectionary product manufacturing), NAICS 3114 (Fruit and vegetable preserving and specialty food manufacturing), NAICS 3115 (Dairy product manufacturing), NAICS 3116 (Meat product manufacturing), NAICS 3118 (Bakeries and tortilla manufacturing), NAICS 3119 (Other food manufacturing), NAICS 3121 (Beverage manufacturing), NAICS 4111 (Food product merchant wholesalers), NAICS 4131 (Food merchant wholesalers), NAICS 4132 (Beverage merchant wholesalers), NAICS 4451 (Grocery stores), NAICS 4452 (Specialty food stores), and NAICS 4453 (Beer, wine and liquor stores).

2 Based on the National Occupational Classification (NOC) 2021. For more information about NOC, visit <https://noc.esdc.gc.ca/>.

Gender Diversity in Agri-Food Sectors

Research shows that organizations with greater gender diversity are more likely to embrace innovation, which is essential for adapting to the evolving challenges in the agri-food sector (Huneke et al., 2024).

Opportunities exist to strengthen the sector's sustainability and long-term prosperity by addressing issues such as government regulations, adapting technology, and labour supply. To realize these opportunities, it is essential to consider the experiences of women in the sector and implement measures to promote gender equality – for the benefit of both workers and organizations.

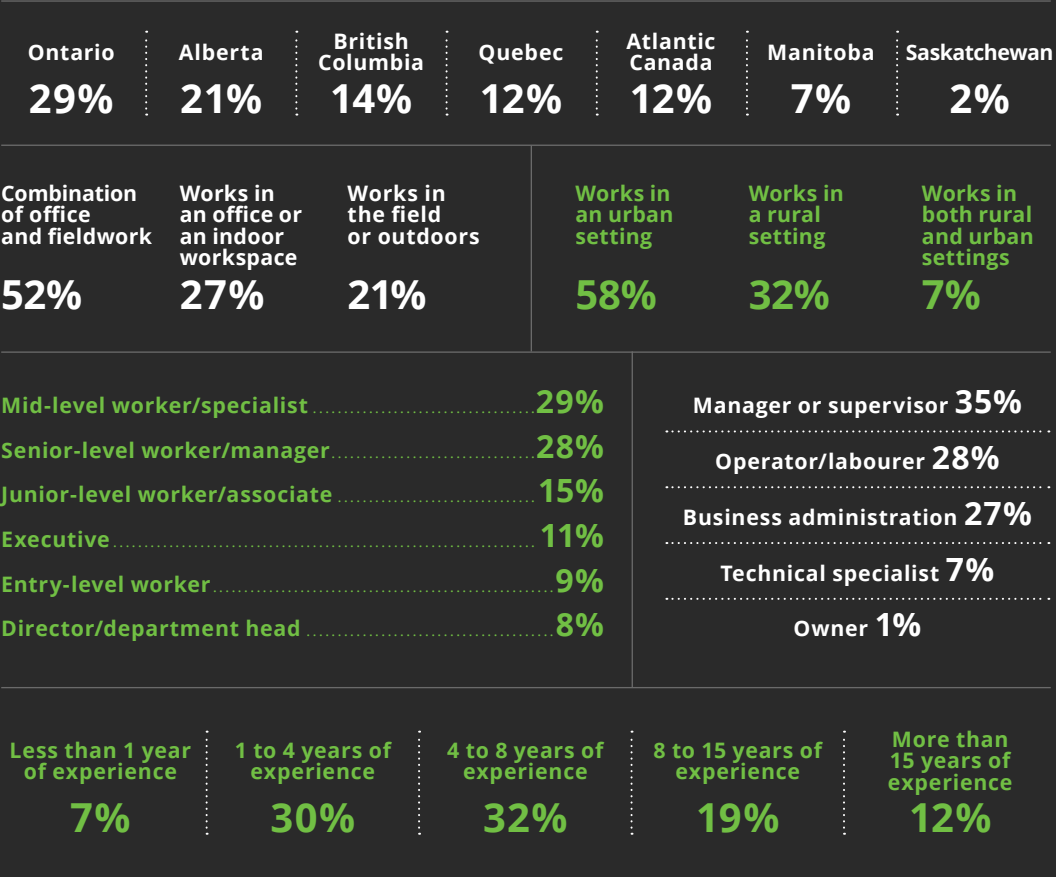
To gain insights into their unique experiences and challenges and identify potential supports that could be useful to their career advancement, we surveyed individuals working in the agri-food sector across Canada who identify as women, transgender, or non-binary in February 2025. This report summarizes their experiences and suggestions for improving equity and inclusion in the sector.





Snapshot: Who We Heard From

We surveyed 161 individuals working in Canada’s agri-food sector who identified as women, transgender, or non-binary persons.



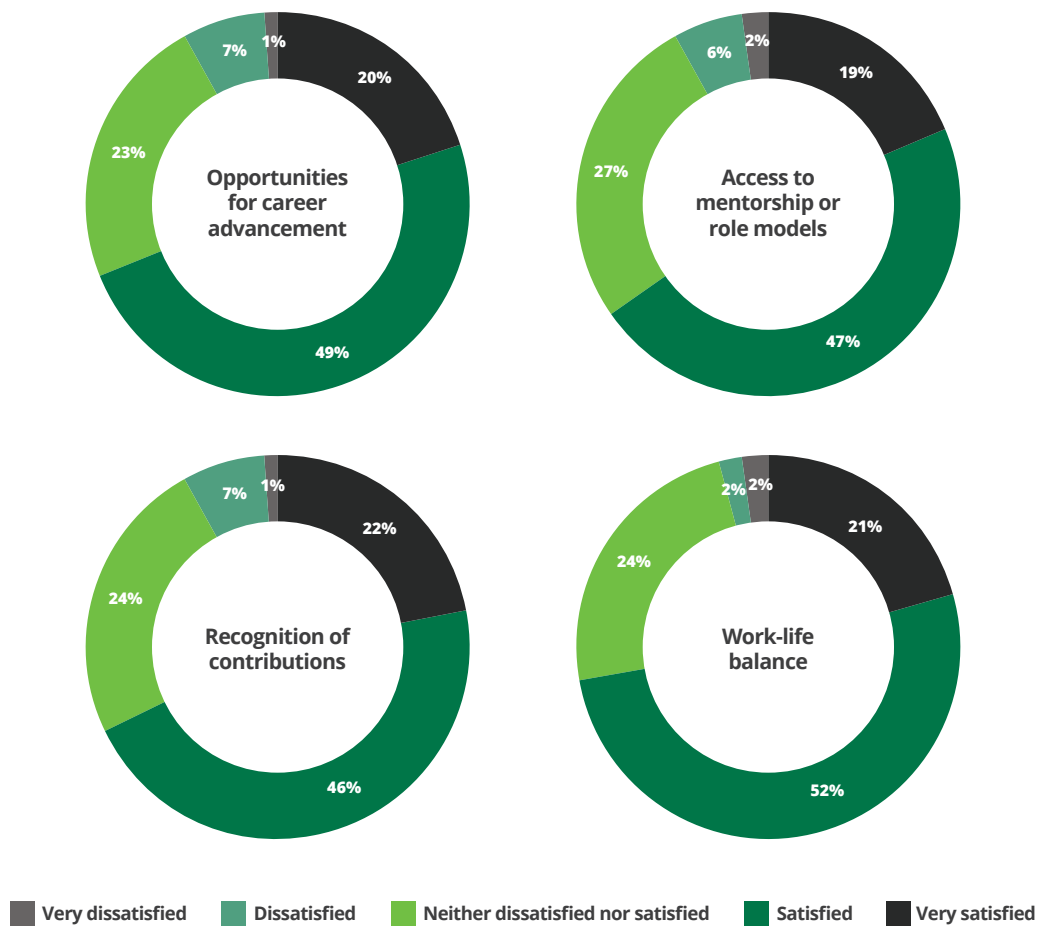
Reporting Note: Percentages in this report may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

HOW SATISFIED ARE THEY WITH THEIR CAREERS?

To set the stage for our analysis, we began by asking respondents how satisfied they are with their career, with a focus on their opportunities for advancement, mentorship, recognition, and work-life balance. Across four satisfaction areas (career advancement, mentorship, recognition, work-life balance), respondents expressed they were 69% satisfied on average with their career. Less than one in ten respondents were dissatisfied.

Figure 2

Satisfaction With Opportunities for Advancement, Mentorship, Recognition, and Work-life Balance



One interesting insight from our survey is that respondents with greater seniority generally reported higher career satisfaction. The following sections take a deeper dive into these results.

Satisfaction with Opportunities for Career Advancement by Seniority

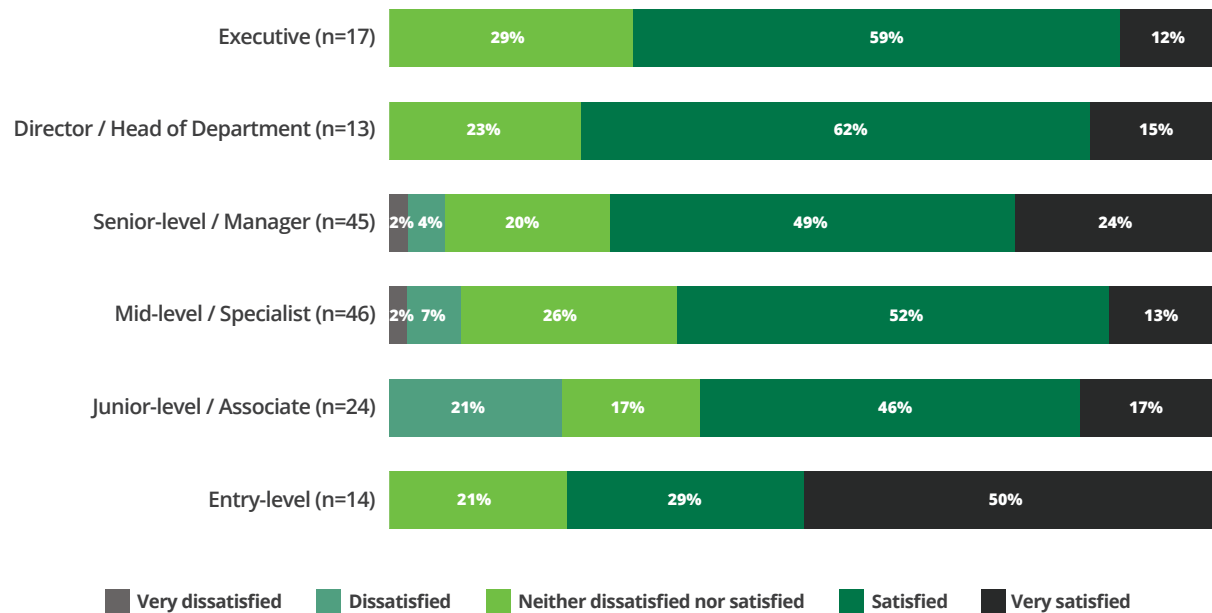
Perceptions of career advancement opportunities vary by seniority level. Entry-level employees and directors report the highest satisfaction, with over 75% feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their advancement prospects.

For junior- and mid-level employees, satisfaction is somewhat lower, with 63% to 65% reporting similar levels. Dissatisfaction is higher among employees at the junior to senior levels compared to those at the entry level, director, and executive levels.

These findings point to an opportunity to strengthen professional development pathways and mentoring support for mid-level talent to improve satisfaction and promote continued upward mobility across the organization.

Figure 3

Satisfaction With Opportunities for Career Advancement, by Seniority

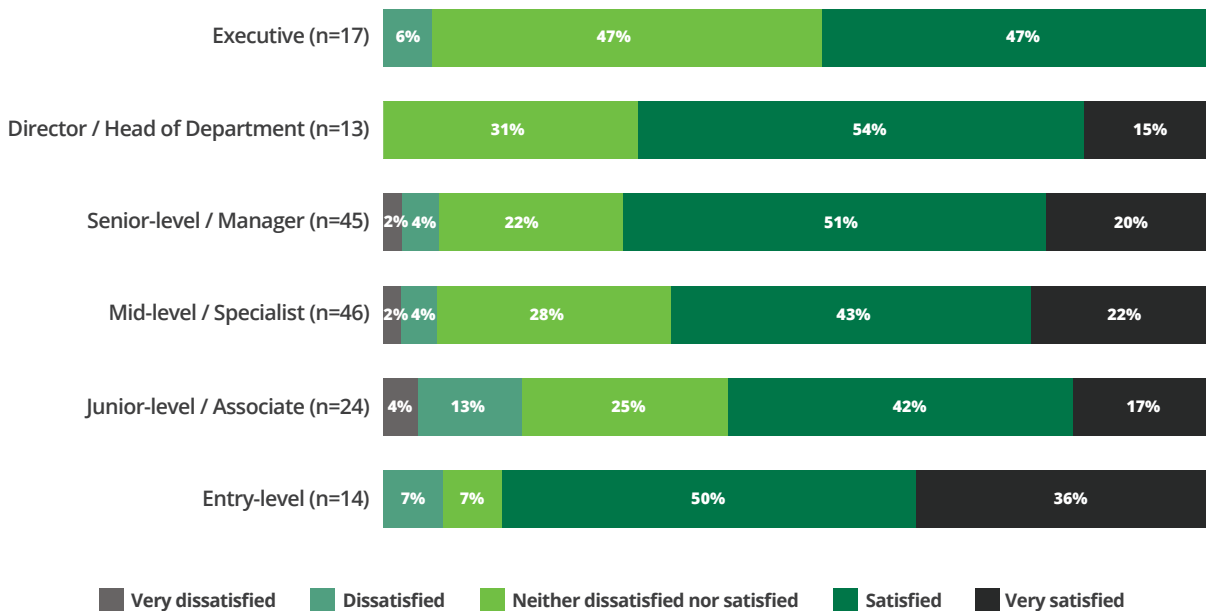


Satisfaction with Access to Mentorship or Role Models by Seniority

Across all levels of seniority, most respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their access to mentorship or role models, with satisfaction highest among entry-level employees (over 85%). Junior-level respondents were the most dissatisfied, with 17% indicating dissatisfaction or strong dissatisfaction. Among senior-level respondents, neutrality became more common, reaching nearly half of executives, suggesting mentorship programs may be less visible or impactful at higher levels. These findings highlight opportunities to strengthen mentorship initiatives for senior staff.

Figure 4

Satisfaction With Access to Mentorship or Role Models, by Seniority



Satisfaction with Recognition of Contributions by Seniority

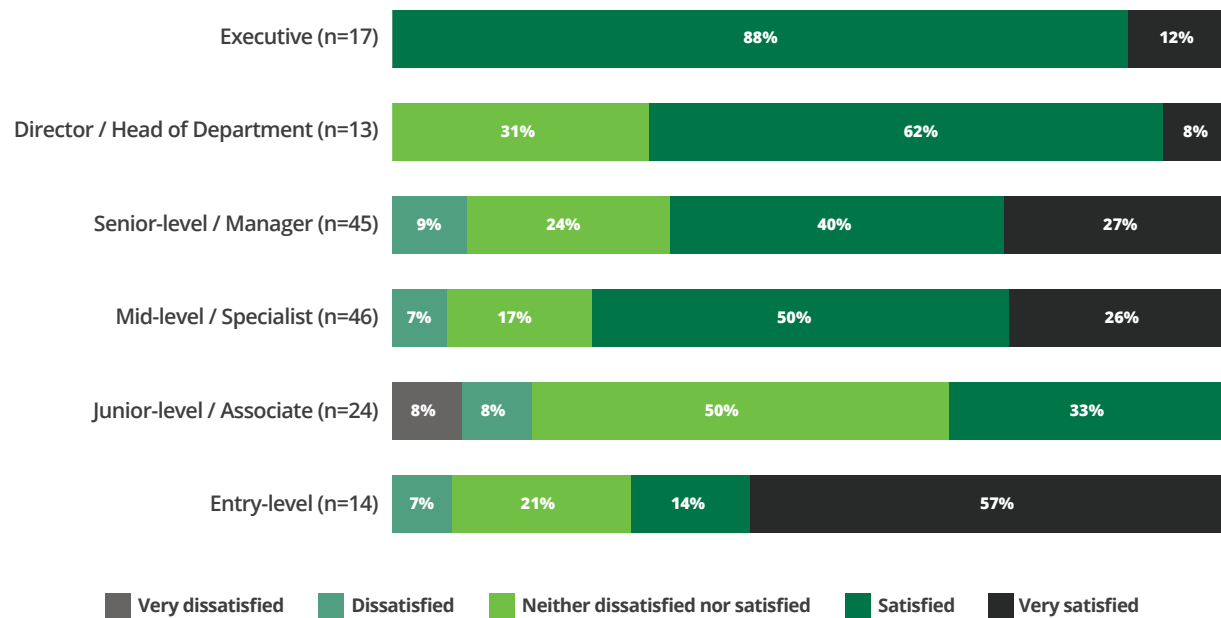
Agri-food workers at higher levels of seniority expressed higher satisfaction with the extent to which their contributions are recognized. Executives reported full satisfaction, while half of junior-level respondents expressed neutral views.

Mid-level and entry-level employees reported high levels of satisfaction, 76% and 71% respectively, ranking second and third overall. Satisfaction was comparatively lower among junior-level employees, who also had the highest rates of dissatisfaction (16%) and neutrality (50%).

These findings suggest that junior-level staff are a key target for interventions aimed at improving recognition, to help ensure they feel valued and remain engaged in the workplace.

Figure 5

Satisfaction With Recognition of Contributions, by Seniority



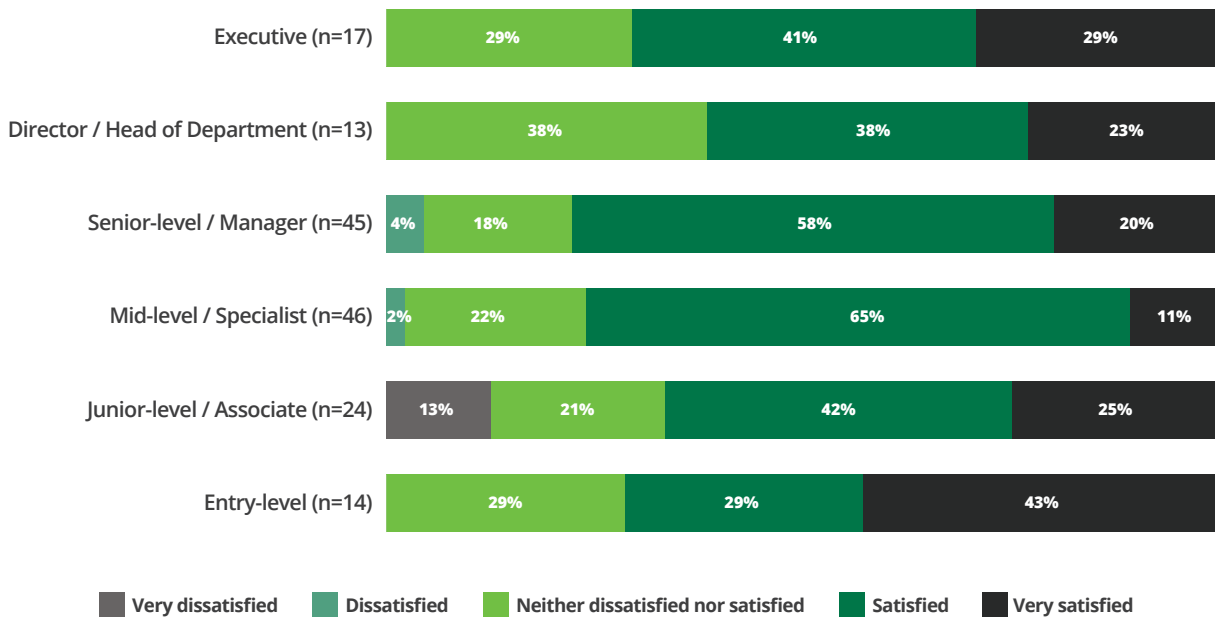
Satisfaction with Work-Life Balance by Seniority

Overall, most respondents reported being satisfied with their work-life balance, particularly those in mid- and senior-level positions. Among senior-level managers, 58% reported being satisfied and 20% reported being very satisfied. Executives and entry-level employees also indicated high satisfaction, with roughly 70% expressing a positive view overall. Notably, entry-level respondents had the highest “very satisfied” rate at 43%. Neutral responses ranged from 18% to 38% across all ranks, while junior-level employees reported the highest dissatisfaction at 13%.

These findings suggest that while work-life balance is generally viewed positively, organizations could enhance flexibility and support, particularly for junior-level employees, to improve overall satisfaction and workplace well-being.

Figure 6

Satisfaction With Work-Life Balance, by Seniority





Snapshot: Helpful Resources and Tools

To better understand the experiences of women, transgender, and non-binary individuals working in agri-food, we asked respondents about the types of tools and resources they had used in the past and which resources they felt would most help their career advancement. In both instances, flexible work arrangements and leadership training were the top two choices.

Table 1
Resources Used or Would be Used by Respondents

Resources/tools used	Resources/tools that would be helpful
Flexible work arrangements (60%)	Flexible work arrangements (75%)
Leadership training (50%)	Leadership training (75%)
Networking opportunities (47%)	Mentorship programs (74%)

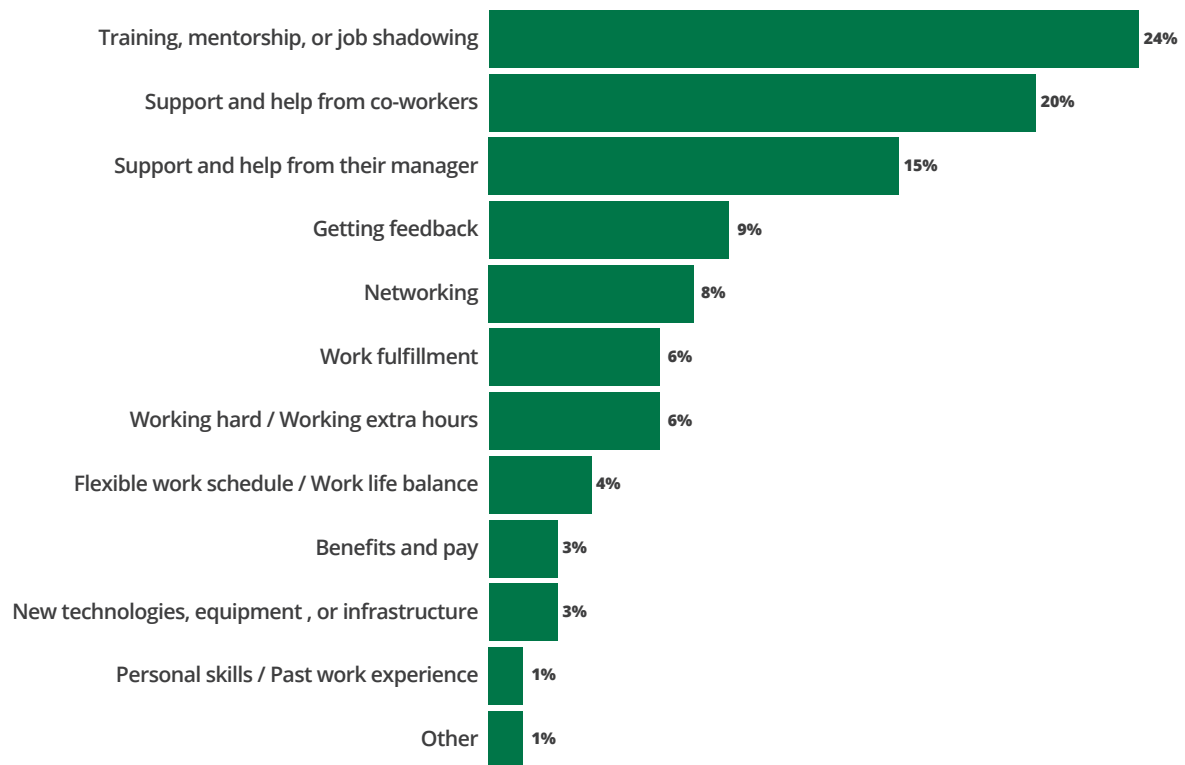


WHAT HAS HELPED THEM SUCCEED IN THEIR WORKPLACE?

We were also interested in exploring what types of positive experiences or supports women, transgender, and non-binary individuals in agri-food careers have encountered that helped them succeed in their workplace. About half (49%) reported having positive experiences, while 40% indicated they had not. The top three positive experiences were training, mentorship, and job shadowing (24%), teamwork (20%), and support from a manager or supervisor (15%).

Figure 7

Respondents' Positive Experiences

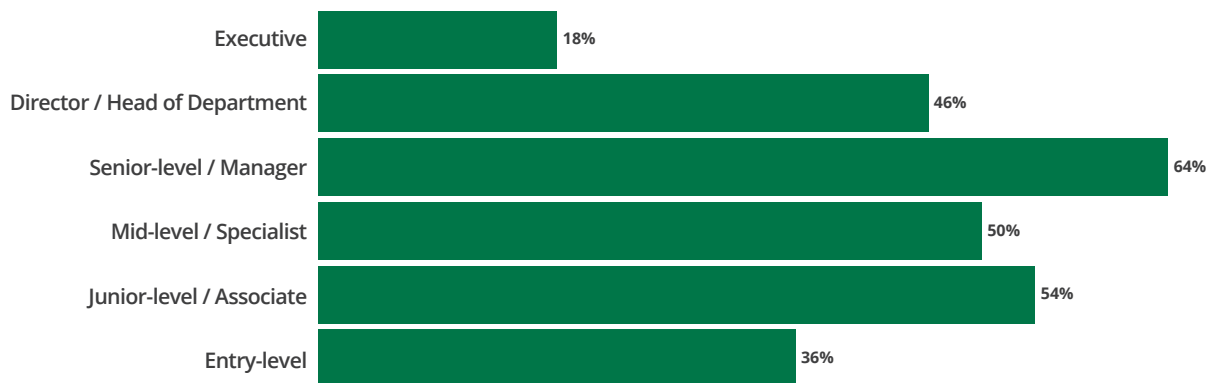


Qualitative responses highlighted the importance of **flexible work arrangements, supportive leadership**, and **strong team collaboration** in promoting work-life balance and job satisfaction. They appreciated **open communication, timely feedback**, and **mentoring from supervisors and colleagues**, which enhanced learning, confidence, and professional growth. Opportunities for skill development through **training, technical projects**, and **industry events** were highly valued, as were access to resources and innovative tools that improved efficiency and problem-solving.

The proportion of respondents reporting positive experiences differed across seniority levels. About two-thirds of senior-level/managers (64%) reported positive experiences or support that benefitted their careers, while only 18% of executives reported benefitting from such supports.

Figure 8

Proportion of Respondents Reporting Positive Experiences, by Seniority



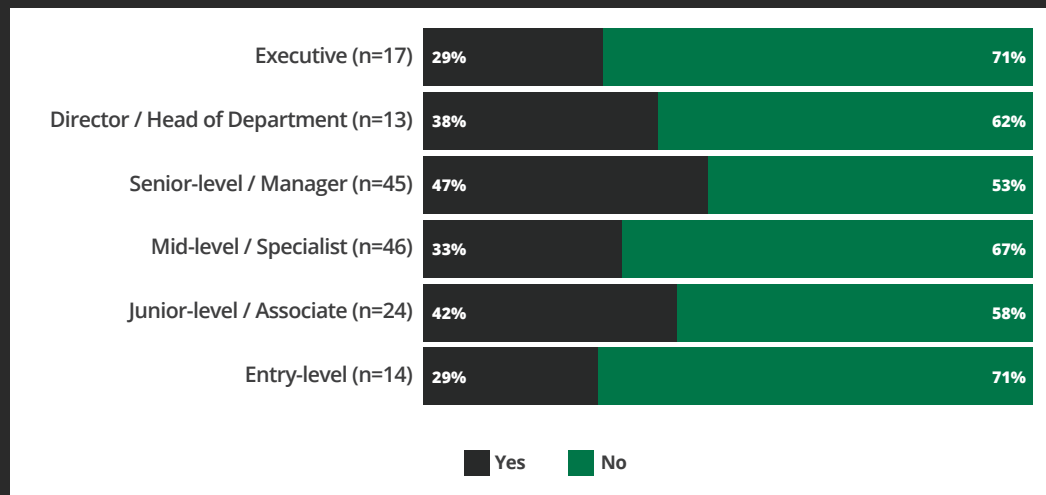


Snapshot: Stretch Assignments as Opportunities for Growth

Stretch assignments are essential for career advancement, as they build the **skills, visibility, and credibility** needed for leadership roles. However, only 37% of respondents reported having had the opportunity to take on challenging or high-profile assignments.

Figure 9

Percentage of Respondents who Experienced Opportunities to Take on Challenging or High-profile Assignments, by Seniority



Here's why these types of assignments matter so much, especially for women, transgender, and non-binary workers.

Stretch assignments push individuals to:

- Build strategic, cross-functional, or leadership capabilities
- Solve complex problems under pressure
- Gain confidence and credibility by demonstrating success in high-stakes situations

Taking on a challenging assignment is a signal that the individual is:

- Willing to grow and take risks
- Ambitious and capable of leadership
- A team player able to handle complexity and ambiguity

High-profile projects often mean working with senior leaders or external stakeholders. This visibility:

- Increases recognition and sponsorship potential
- Puts them on the radar for promotions or future roles
- Builds a track record that leadership can reference when considering advancement

Challenging and high-profile assignments:

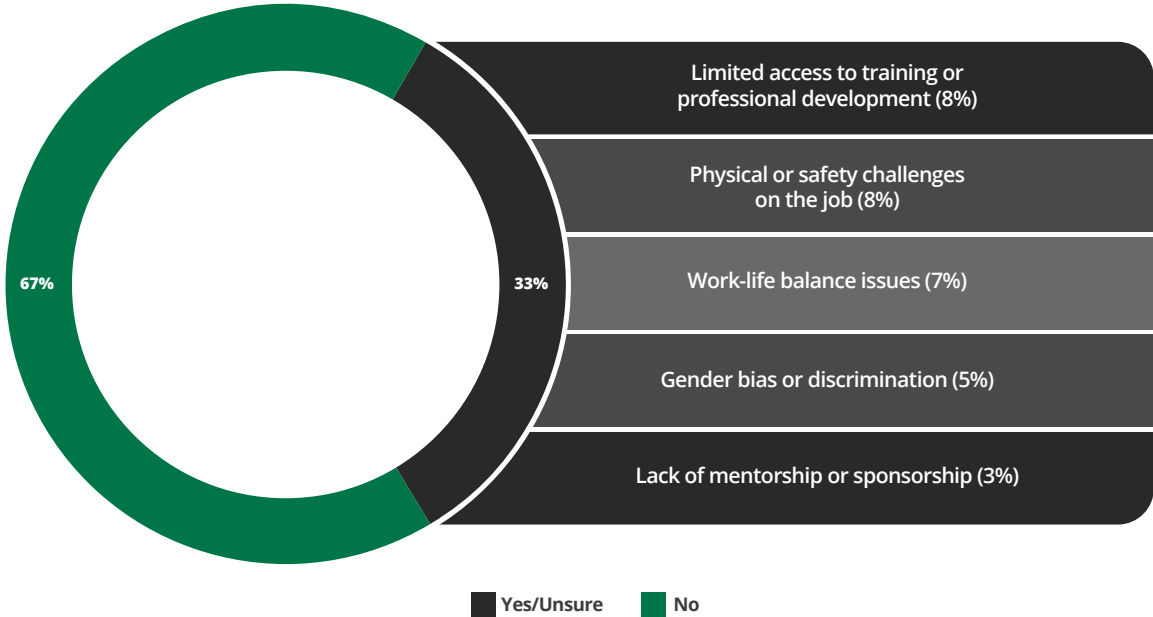
- Provide access to the kinds of roles and accomplishments that build promotable profiles
- Break down the "experience trap" (you need experience to get experience)
- Help close gaps in leadership representation over time

WHAT BARRIERS TO ADVANCEMENT DO THEY ENCOUNTER?

When asked whether they had faced any barriers to advancement due to gender or gender expression, more than two-thirds of respondents reported that they had not faced such barriers, 27% reported that they had, and 6% were unsure.

Those respondents who had, or were unsure if they had, faced gender-related barriers were asked to identify the most significant challenge they faced. Limited access to training and professional development, as well as physical or safety challenges on the job, appeared at the top of the list (25% of respondents), followed by work-life balance issues (23%), gender bias or discrimination (15%), and lack of mentorship (9%).

Figure 10
Proportion of Respondents Experiencing Gender-Related Barriers



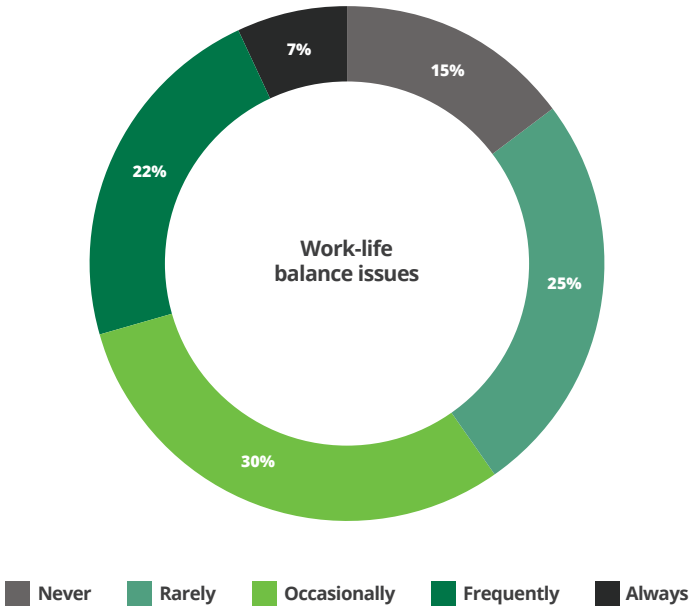
To better understand how prevalent these challenges are for women, transgender and non-binary workers in the agri-food sector, we asked all respondents how frequently they encounter each of them in their workplace.

Work-life Balance Issues

When workers don't have a good balance between work and personal life, it can be harder for them to move ahead in their careers. Long hours or strict schedules can make them too tired or busy to learn new skills, take on important projects, or build strong relationships at work. Others might see them as less dedicated, even if they work hard. This can lead to missed chances for promotions or career growth.

Figure 11

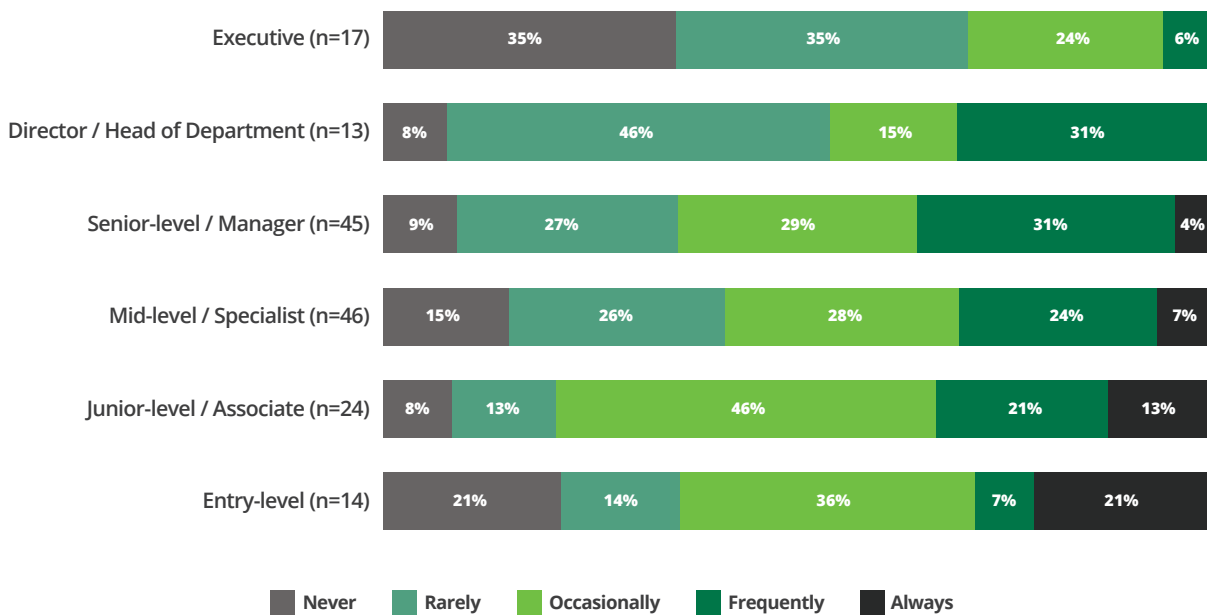
Frequency of Work-life Balance Issues



Nearly three in ten respondents (29%) reported always or frequently encountering work-life balance challenges in their workplace. Senior-level/managers and junior-level/associates were the most likely to report frequent or constant difficulties, at 36% and 33% respectively. Directors showed a more divided picture: while 31% reported frequent issues, a majority (54%) said they rarely or never experienced such challenges. Executives were the least likely to report difficulties, with 71% indicating they rarely or never faced them, though more than a quarter still noted occasional struggles. This suggests that while work-life balance concerns diminish at higher levels, they are not entirely resolved.

Figure 12

Frequency of Work-life Balance Issues, by Seniority

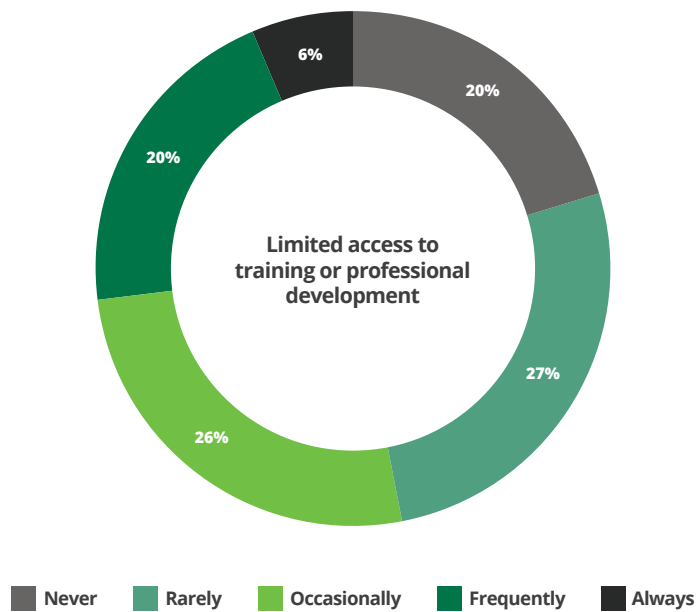


Limited Access to Training or Professional Development

When people don't have access to training or professional development, it can hold them back in their careers. Without chances to learn new skills or improve the ones they have, it's harder to take on bigger responsibilities or apply for higher-level jobs. They may also fall behind others who do get those opportunities. Over time, this can make it harder to move up and reach their career goals.

Figure 13

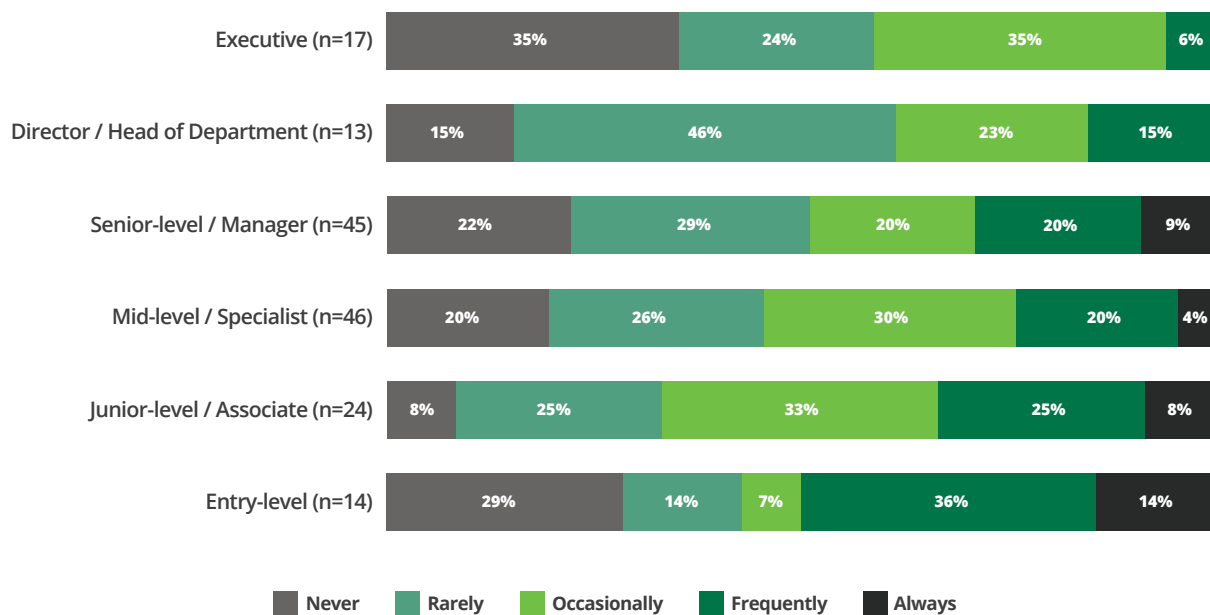
Frequency of Limited Access to Training or Professional Development



More than one-quarter of respondents (27%) reported frequently or always experiencing limited access to training or professional development. Access to training and professional development varied across career levels, generally improving with seniority. At the entry level, 50% of respondents reported frequent or always limited access, while 43% reported never or rarely experiencing limitations. Junior-level staff showed a mixed pattern, with 33% frequent or always, 33% never or rarely, and 33% occasional. Mid-level women had better access than lower levels, with 46% reporting never or rarely limited access. Senior managers reported 29% frequent or always and 51% never or rarely. Directors reported 15% frequent or always and 62% never or rarely, while executives showed the least limitations, with 6% frequent or always and 59% never or rarely.

Figure 14

Frequency of Limited Access to Training or Professional Development, by Seniority

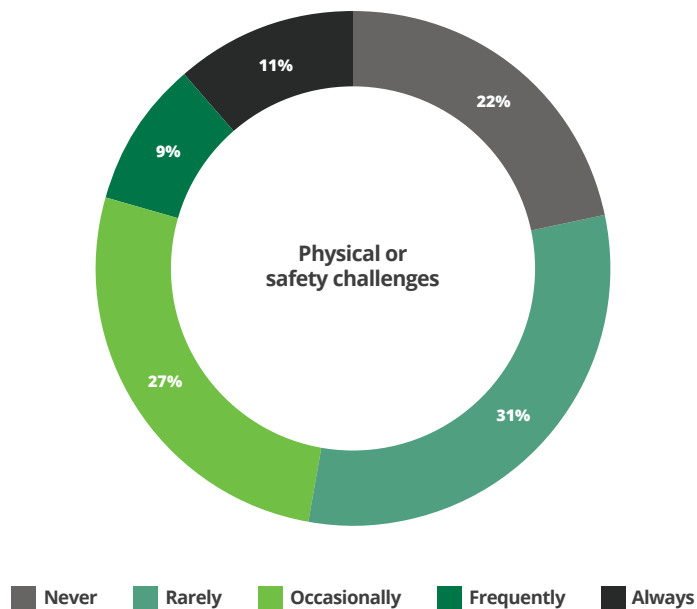


Physical or Safety Challenges

Physical or safety challenges on the job can lower job satisfaction and limit chances for advancement. When tasks, equipment, or training are not designed with women in mind, there is a greater risk of injury or strain. This can make it harder for women to stay in the industry long term, take on leadership roles, or feel valued and respected in their work.

Figure 15

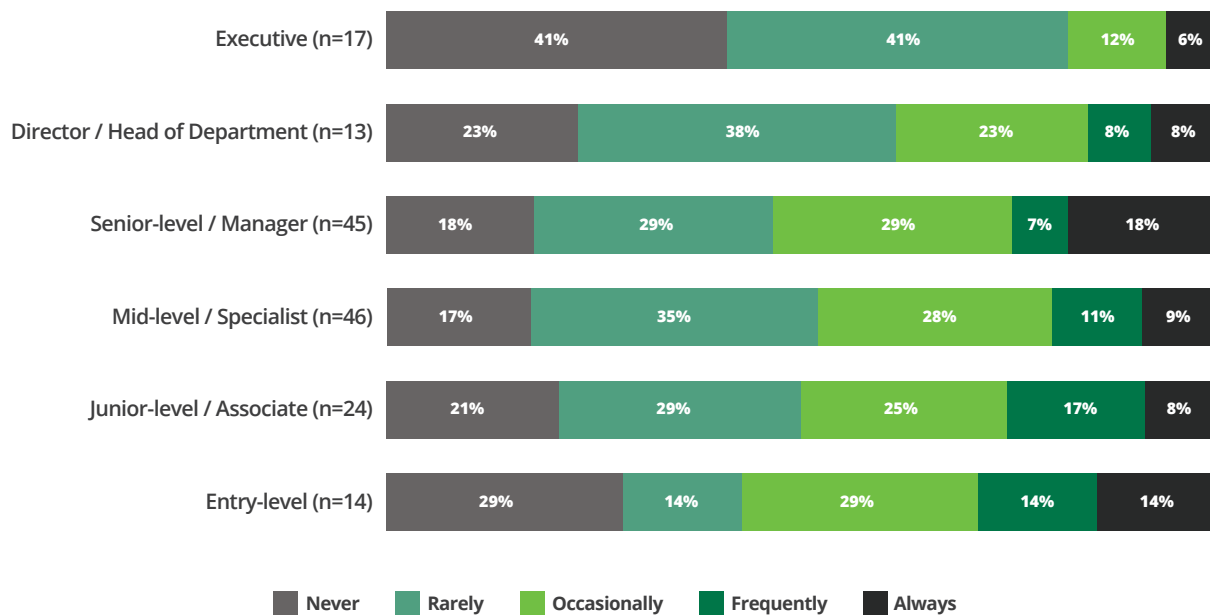
Frequency of Physical or Safety Challenges



One-fifth of respondents reported that they always or frequently experience physical or safety challenges on the job. These challenges occur across all career stages, with the highest rates among entry-level employees (29%) and junior-level staff (25%). Executives, however, report the lowest frequency of these issues, with only 6% experiencing them frequently or always. Employees at higher levels, including directors and executives, experience these challenges far less frequently, with the majority reporting them only occasionally or not at all. These findings suggest that physical or safety challenges are more common in earlier career stages and highlight the importance of addressing workplace safety for employees at all levels.

Figure 16

Frequency of Physical or Safety Challenges, by Seniority

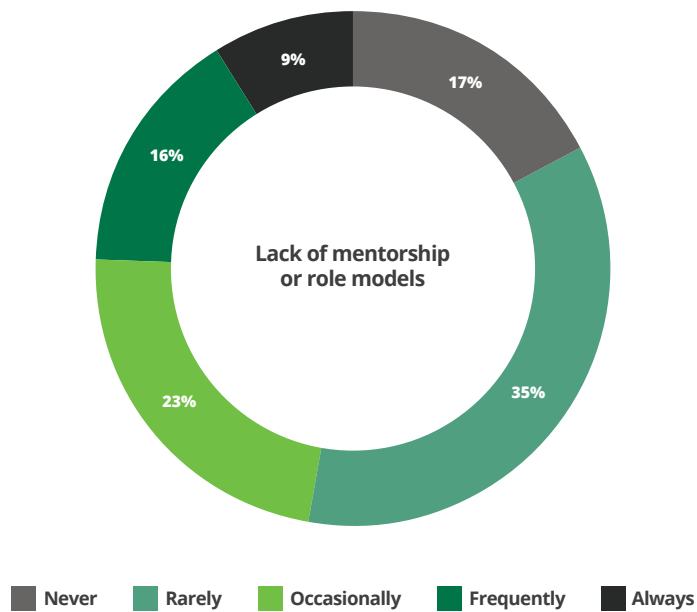


Lack of Mentorship or Sponsorship

When people don't have a mentor or sponsor at work, it can be harder for them to grow in their careers. Mentors give advice and help with learning new skills, while sponsors speak up for others and help them get noticed for new opportunities. Without this kind of support, it's easy for an employee to feel stuck or overlooked, even if they work hard. This can make it harder to move up or reach their career goals.

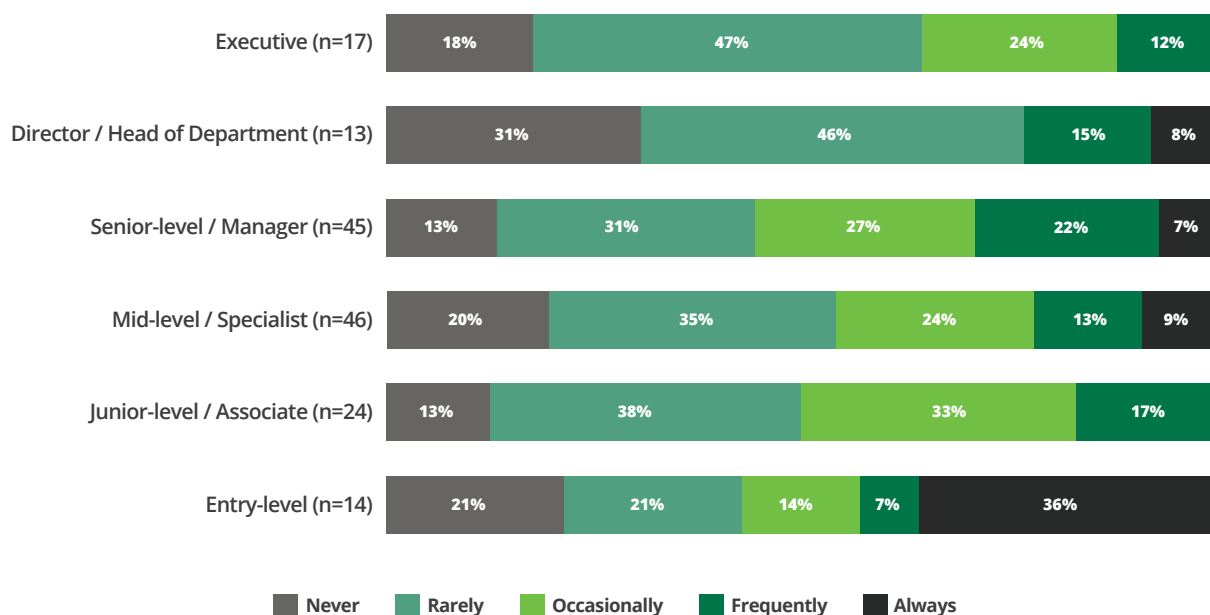
Figure 17

Frequency of a Lack of Mentorship or Sponsorship



Nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents reported frequently or always experiencing a lack of mentorship or role models in the workplace. Experiences of mentorship gaps were observed across all career stages, with frequent challenges most pronounced at the entry-level (43%) and moderately reported at mid- and senior-level roles (22–29%). Directors also faced some gaps, with 23% reporting frequent lack of mentorship, while junior-level professionals experienced these challenges less often (17%). Executives generally reported the fewest challenges (12%), though a small proportion still experienced persistent gaps. These findings indicate that mentorship support remains uneven across career stages, particularly affecting those at the entry levels.

Figure 18
Frequency of a Lack of Mentorship or Sponsorship, by Seniority

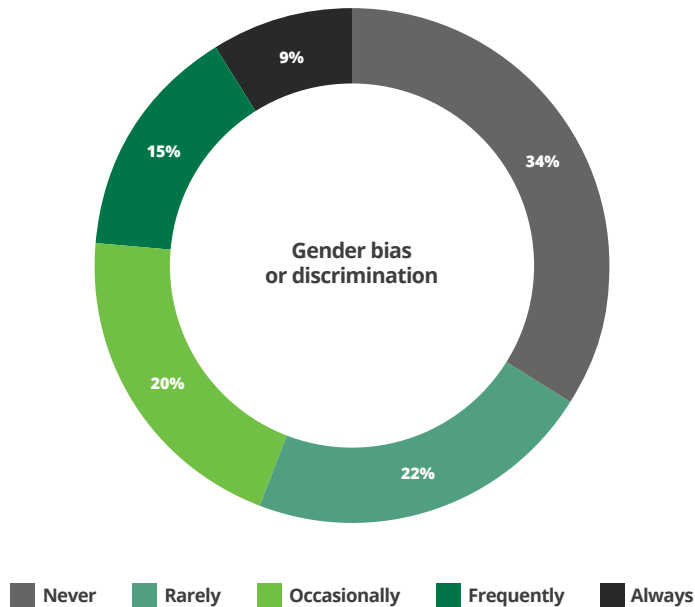


Gender Bias or Discrimination

Gender bias or discrimination can make it harder for women and gender-diverse people to move ahead in their careers. They may be treated differently, have their ideas overlooked, or be passed over for promotions and important projects. This can make them feel unwelcome or less confident at work. When people aren't given the same chances to grow and succeed, it becomes much harder for them to reach their career goals.

Figure 19

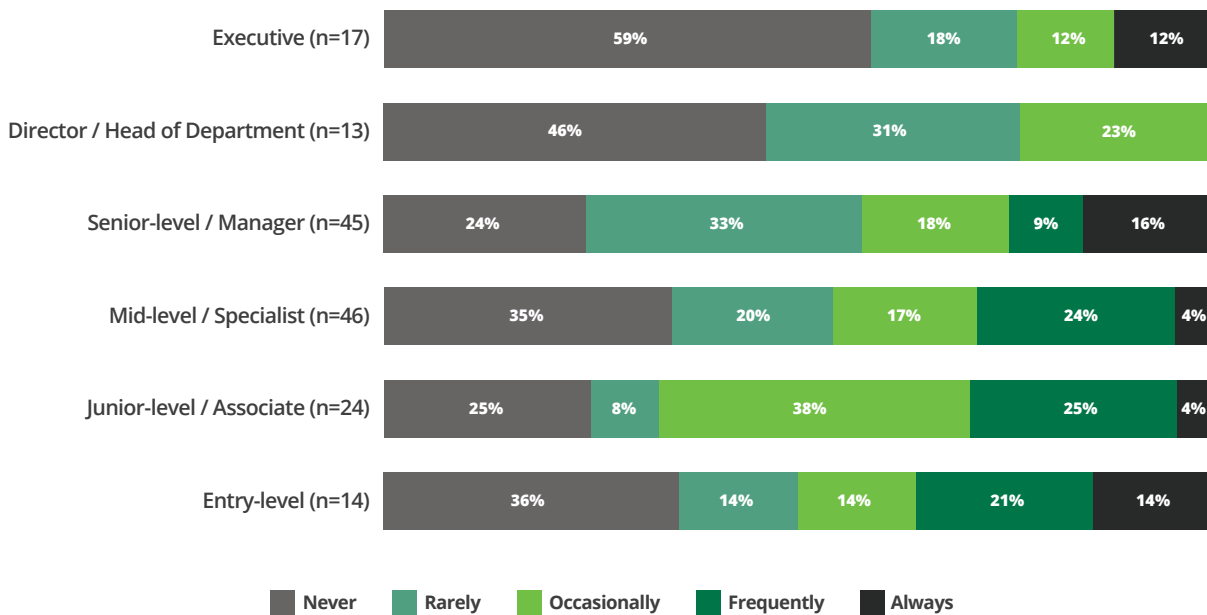
Frequency of Gender Bias or Discrimination



Nearly one-quarter of respondents (24%) reported experiencing gender bias or discrimination frequently or always, while more than half (56%) indicated it occurred rarely or never. Early-career employees were the most likely to report frequent experiences of bias, with 36% of entry-level, 29% of junior-level, and 28% of mid-level staff affected. In contrast, senior leaders were far less likely to report such issues—no directors and only 12% of executives indicated frequent experiences. Overall, higher-level staff were more likely to report that gender bias rarely or never occurred, with 77% of directors and 76% of executives indicating this, highlighting a notable disparity in experiences across seniority levels.

Figure 20

Frequency of Gender Bias or Discrimination, by Seniority



Snapshot: How Prevalent Are Gender Equity Policies in Agri-Food?



Most respondents (68%) reported that their workplace or organization has policies or initiatives in place to support gender equity. However, 22% indicated that no such measures exist, and 10% were unsure. This suggests that while gender equity is a priority for many employers, there is still room for broader adoption and clearer communication of such initiatives.

HOW MANY OF THEM EXPERIENCE WORKPLACE GENDER INEQUALITY?

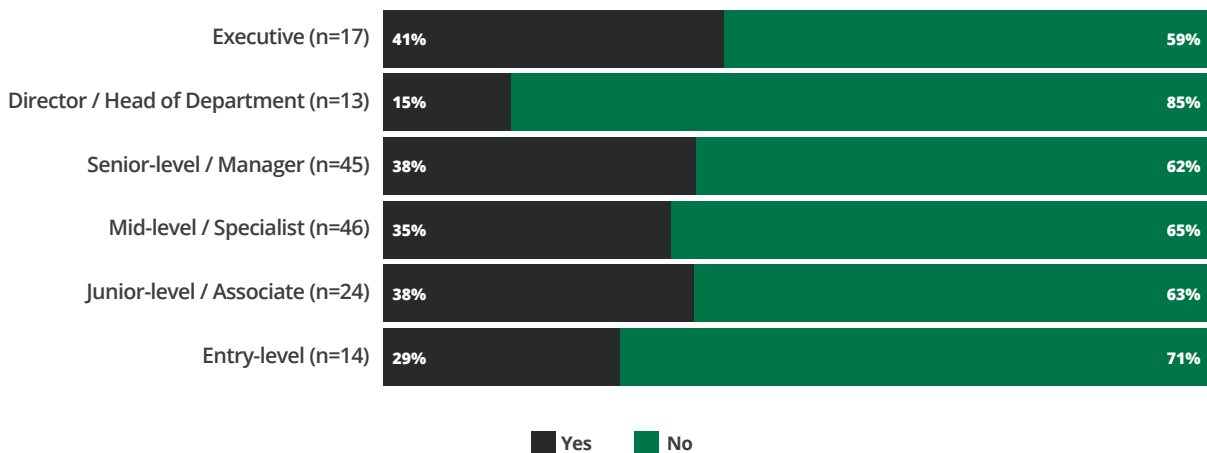
In this section, we take a closer look at how women, transgender and non-binary individuals are experiencing their agri-food sector workplaces when it comes to fairness and inclusion. We asked respondents if they had personally experienced or observed things like unequal pay, being left out of important decisions, or gender-based harassment in their workplace. Their answers shed light on the everyday challenges that can hold people back and highlight where the agri-food sector still has work to do to create inclusive environments.

Unequal Pay for Equal Work

More than one-third of respondents (35%) reported experiencing unequal pay for equal work. The prevalence varied by seniority, with the highest rates among executives (41%) and junior-level/associates and senior-level/managers (both 38%), moderate rates among mid-level/specialists (35%) and entry-level employees (29%), and the lowest among directors (15%).

Figure 21

Percentage of Respondents who Experience Unequal Pay for Equal Work, by Seniority

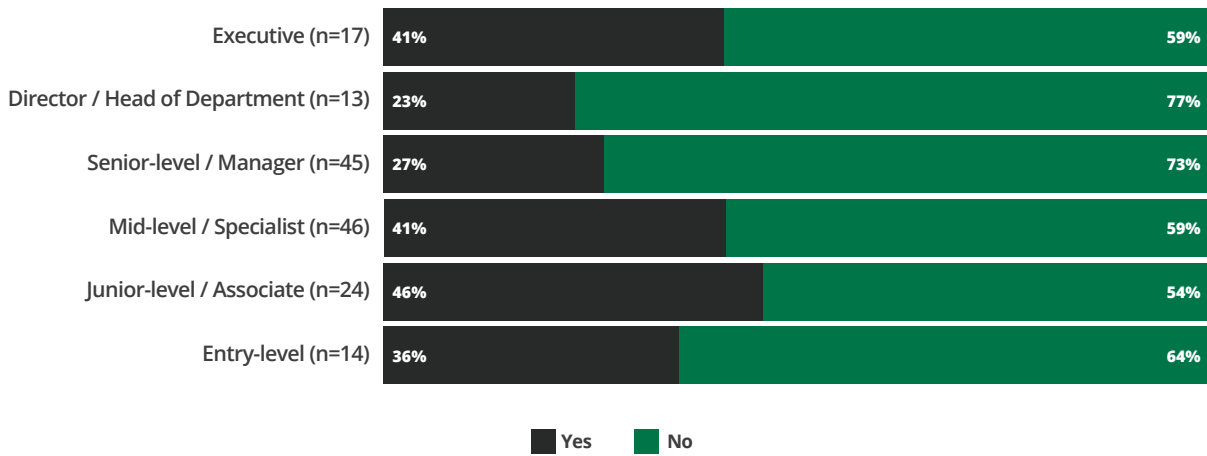


Exclusion from Decision-Making Opportunities

Overall, more than one in three respondents (36%) reported experiencing exclusion from decision-making opportunities, while nearly two-thirds (64%) did not. The likelihood of exclusion varied across organizational levels, with the highest rates observed among junior-level/associates (46%), followed by mid-level/specialists and executives (both 41%) and entry-level employees (36%). Senior-level/managers (27%) and directors (23%) reported the lowest levels of exclusion, suggesting that, in general, opportunities for participation in decision-making tend to increase with seniority, though some higher-level roles still experience notable exclusion.

Figure 22

Percentage of Respondents who Experience Exclusion from Decision-making Opportunities, by Seniority

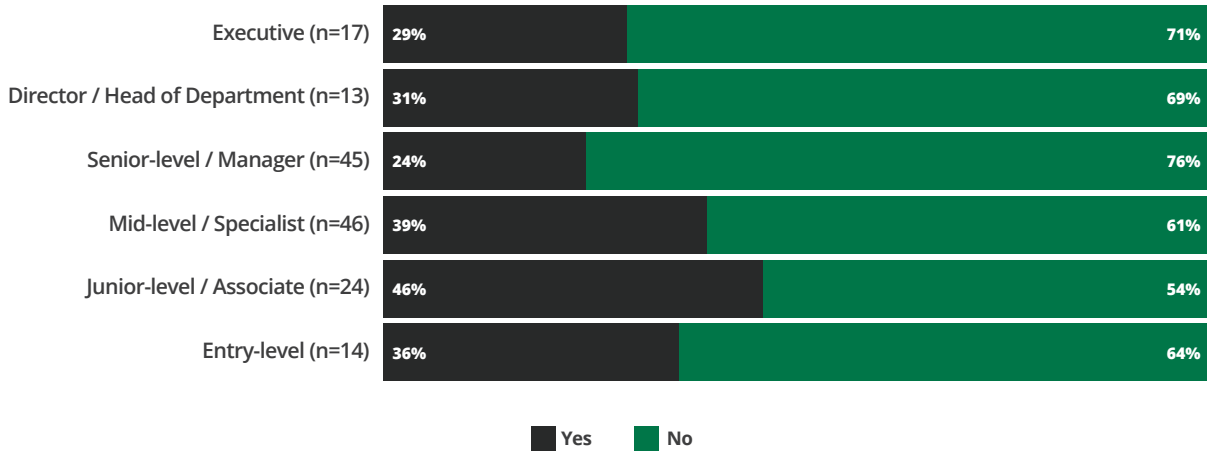


Dismissal of Ideas or Contributions

Across all respondents, more than one in three respondents (34%) reported experiencing dismissal of their ideas or contributions, while two in three (66%) indicated their ideas were not dismissed. Dismissal was most frequently reported by junior-level/associate employees, with nearly half (46%) experiencing it, followed by mid-level/specialists at just under two in five (39%). Entry-level employees reported slightly more than one in three (36%), whereas seniors/managers (24%), directors (31%), and executives (29%) reported lower rates. Overall, the data suggests that employees in lower- to mid-level roles are more likely to have their ideas dismissed compared to those in higher-level positions.

Figure 23

Percentage of Respondents who Experience Dismissal of Their Ideas or Contributions, by Seniority

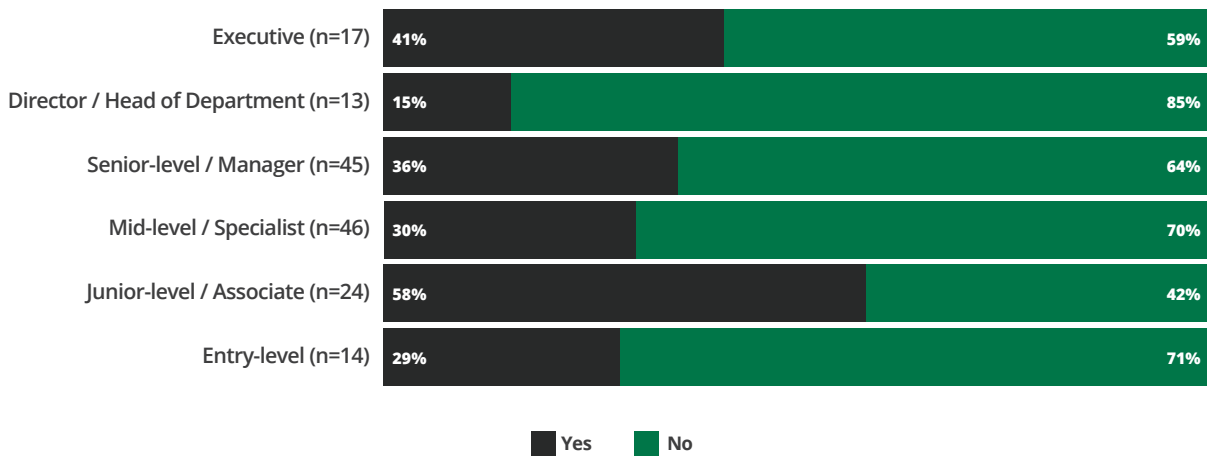


Lack of Diversity in Senior Leadership Roles

Overall, 35% of respondents reported a lack of diversity in senior leadership roles. Concern was highest among junior-level/associates (58%) and executives (41%), moderate among senior-level/managers (36%) and md-level/specialists (30%), and lower among entry-level employees (29%) and directors (15%).

Figure 24

Percentage of Respondents who Experience a Lack of Diversity in Senior Leadership Roles, by Seniority

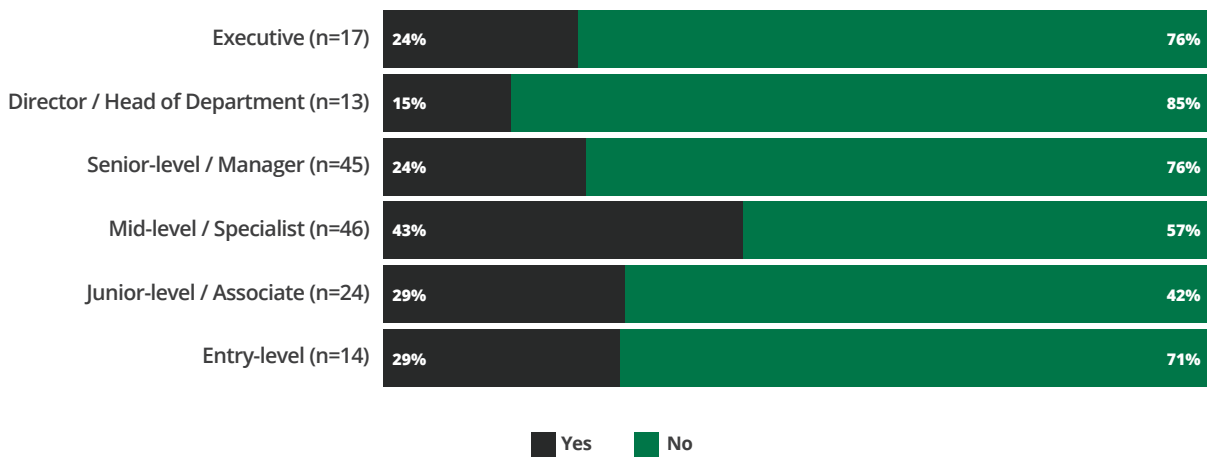


Gender Harassment or Inappropriate Behaviour in the Workplace

Three in ten respondents (30%) experienced gender harassment or inappropriate behaviour in the workplace. The prevalence was highest among mid-level specialists, with 43% affected. Among entry-level and junior-level/associate employees, 29% experienced such issues, while 24% of senior-level managers and executives did so. Directors were least likely to be affected, with 15% indicating concern.

Figure 25

Percentage of Respondents who Experience Gender Harassment or Inappropriate Behaviour, by Seniority



WHAT WOULD THEY CHANGE TO MAKE THEIR WORKPLACE MORE GENDER INCLUSIVE?

When respondents were asked what, if anything, they would like to change in their workplace, 66% responded that there was nothing that they would change, while 27% provided a suggestion for improvement. Those who provided suggestions for change focused largely on ensuring human resource practices promote equity, creating a more inclusive organizational culture, and providing focused training opportunities for gender diverse individuals.

1 Create equitable hiring, promotion, and leadership development processes (32% of suggestions)

- Ensure hiring, promotions, and leadership opportunities are based on qualifications and merit, not gender.
- Increase the representation of women in senior management and decision-making roles.
- Set organizational goals for equitable gender representation across all levels.
- Expand family-friendly policies, such as maternity and parental leave, to support career continuity.
- Actively recruit and retain female talent for both entry-level and top-tier positions.

2 Foster an inclusive, respectful, and supportive workplace culture (30%)

- Encourage all employees to contribute to decision-making and value diverse perspectives.
 - Strengthen team-building initiatives to promote collaboration and mutual respect.
 - Ensure leadership models inclusive behavior and actively supports underrepresented groups.
 - Create mechanisms to address inappropriate behavior and foster a safe, respectful environment.
 - Promote a corporate culture of gender equality and inclusivity in all communication and practices.
-

3 Expand access to training, career development, and advancement (14%)

- Implement mentorship and leadership programs, particularly for women and underrepresented employees.
- Provide workshops, on-the-job training, and professional development opportunities across all levels.
- Encourage cross-department collaboration to broaden skillsets and professional networks.
- Offer targeted programs to prepare employees for leadership and specialized roles.

4 Strengthen, monitor, and enforce gender equality and equity policies (9%)

- Regularly evaluate the company's performance on gender equality and take corrective actions.
- Establish a dedicated role or office, such as a gender equality commissioner, to monitor compliance and workplace culture.
- Implement policies to prevent discrimination and create a gender-equal working environment.
- Offer ongoing gender awareness and diversity training to all employees.

5 Ensure pay equity across all roles (9%)

- Conduct regular pay audits to identify and address gender-based pay gaps.
- Maintain transparency around compensation practices while respecting confidentiality.
- Guarantee equal pay for equal work and ensure salary progression is fair and merit based.

6 Provide flexible work options and family-friendly policies for all genders (7%)

- Offer flexible work arrangements to help employees balance work and personal responsibilities.
 - Provide on-site or subsidized childcare services to support working parents.
 - Ensure workplace accommodation meets the diverse needs of all employees.
-

HOW WOULD ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS IMPACT THEIR CAREER GROWTH?

When respondents were asked how addressing systemic barriers would impact their career growth, more than half (56%) responded that it would have no impact, while just 27% indicated that it would have a positive effect.

Among those who indicated that addressing systemic barriers would have a positive effect on their career growth, impacts identified included:

1 Increasing opportunities for career advancement (45% of responses)

- By addressing systemic barriers, organizations can provide transparent pathways to promotions, leadership roles, and skill-building opportunities, enabling employees to progress in their careers based on merit and potential rather than bias or exclusion.

2 Improving employee well-being and confidence at work (25%)

- Providing support, recognition, and development resources enhances employees' confidence, job satisfaction, and resilience, enabling them to take on challenges, pursue growth opportunities, and perform at their best.

3 Fostering a more inclusive and collaborative workplace culture (14%)

- Creating an inclusive environment encourages diverse perspectives, collaboration, and mutual respect. Employees feel valued and supported, which strengthens engagement, retention, and the ability to take on new responsibilities confidently.

4 Promoting equitable recruitment and promotion practices (5%)

- Ensuring fairness in hiring and promotion decisions reduces bias and increases access to leadership and development opportunities, allowing talented individuals to advance their careers without being hindered by systemic inequities.

5 Supporting work-life balance and flexibility (5%)

- Flexible work arrangements and policies that respect personal responsibilities allow employees to maintain balance, reduce burnout, and sustain long-term career engagement, supporting their professional growth alongside personal well-being.

6 Ensuring fair pay and equal benefits (2%)

- Addressing pay inequities and providing equal benefits ensures that employees are rewarded fairly for their contributions, enhancing motivation, retention, and the ability to invest in career development and professional advancement.
-

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study highlight both the strengths and ongoing challenges facing women, transgender, and non-binary professionals in Canada's agri-food sector. While many respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with their work, mentorship, and recognition, the data reveal persistent gaps in advancement opportunities and equity experiences across career stages. Junior- and mid-level employees, in particular, face greater barriers to progression, more frequent work-life balance challenges, and fewer chances to take on stretch assignments that build leadership readiness.

At the same time, the sector shows encouraging signs of progress. Most organizations have implemented gender equity initiatives, and senior leaders report high satisfaction and fewer experiences of bias or exclusion. These findings suggest that meaningful change is underway, but its benefits are not yet evenly distributed. Closing this gap will require intentional efforts to extend mentorship, leadership training, and flexible work options to employees earlier in their careers.

Addressing the systemic barriers identified in this report—from unequal access to professional development to lingering gender bias—presents a significant opportunity for the agri-food sector. By embedding equity and inclusion principles into recruitment, promotion, and workplace culture, organizations can strengthen engagement, retention, and innovation.

Ultimately, building a more equitable and supportive environment is not only a matter of fairness; it is an investment in the future of the agri-food sector. Empowering women, transgender, and non-binary professionals to advance and lead enhances workforce resilience, enriches decision-making, and ensures the sector continues to thrive in an evolving economic and social landscape.



REFERENCES

- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. (2024, February 22). *What We Heard Report - Agricultural Labour Strategy*. <https://agriculture.canada.ca/en/departement/transparency/public-opinion-research-consultations/what-we-heard-report-agricultural-labour-strategy#s5>
- Bastian, R. (2023, December 14). *The power of representation in leadership roles*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebekahbastian/2020/11/09/the-power-of-representation-in-leadership-roles/>
- Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute. (2024, July 16). *Agri-Food Risk Report Phase 1*. <https://capi-icpa.ca/explore/resources/agri-food-risk-report-phase-1/>
- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. (2025, June 17). Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's 2025–26 Departmental Plan. Government of Canada. [Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's 2025–26 Departmental Plan - agriculture.canada.ca](https://agriculture.canada.ca)
- Dentato, M. P., Craig, S. L., Messinger, L., Lloyd, M., & McInroy, L. B. (2013). Outness among LGBTQ social work students in North America: The contribution of environmental supports and perceptions of comfort. *Social Work Education*, 33(4), 485–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2013.855193>
- Future Skills Centre. (2024, July 31). *The Next Frontier in Canada's Agri-Food Sector*. https://fsc-ccf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/the-next-frontier_2024.pdf
- Huneke, M., Vinodrai, T., & Hall, H. (2024, August). *Crunching the numbers: A snapshot of Canada's Agricultural Technology Landscape*. University of Waterloo. <https://uwaterloo.ca/disruptive-technologies-economic-development/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/ag-crunchbase-report-august-2024-final.pdf>
- Information and Communications Technology Council. (2021, November 3). *Canadian Agri-Food Technology*. ICTC. <https://ictc-ctic.ca/reports/canadian-agrifood-technology>
- MacRae, R. (2021). *Gender and the food system*. Food Policy for Canada. <https://foodpolicyforcanada.info.yorku.ca/gender-and-the-food-system/>
- Saghafi, Z. (2025, May 6). *Regulatory uncertainty hurts critical innovation in Canada's Food Industry*. Policy Options. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/may-2025/food-industry-regs/>
- Statistics Canada. (2025a, May 30). *Gross domestic product (GDP) at basic prices, by industry, annual average*. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3610043403>
- Tourism HR Canada. (2024, February 9). *Spotlight: Food and Beverage Services Workforce*. <https://tourismhr.ca/2024/02/09/spotlight-food-and-beverage-services-workforce/>

CONTACT US

...

ECO Canada
Suite 400, 105 12 Avenue SE
Calgary, Alberta T2G 1A1

P : 1-800-890-1924
E : research@eco.ca
W : eco.ca



@ecocanada

We are located in the heart of Calgary, Alberta, and have representatives located in Vancouver, Edmonton, Windsor and Halifax. Visit our website or contact us for more information.