

EXCHANGE PROGRAM

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

3RD EDITION * PRETORIA * 2025



Charting the Path Forward: Overcoming Challenges and
Leveraging Opportunities for Female Leadership in
Lesotho's Supreme Audit Institution (SAI)

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Maseru, 4 December 2025

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in leadership is a cornerstone of good governance, accountability, and institutional effectiveness. In Lesotho, where women constitute a significant portion of the public sector workforce, their representation in senior leadership roles remains an evolving landscape. Following the promulgation of the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution Act, 2025, the Office of the Auditor-General was formally renamed as the Supreme Audit Institution (SAI). In terms of leadership representation, the institution continues to make notable progress: at mid-to-senior management levels as women currently outnumber men.

This achievement positions the SAI as a potential benchmark within the INTOSAI community. However, true gender parity requires examining not just numerical representation but the quality of influence, access to the very top echelons of power, and the sustainability of this progress. The SAI's mandate to enhance public sector accountability demands that it not only achieve but also critically assess and institutionalize gender equity within its own ranks.

This report provides an analytical reflection on the main challenges and opportunities for greater female participation in leadership positions within Lesotho's SAI, acknowledging its existing strengths while identifying pathways to consolidate and advance gains. It draws on insights from the ProInter-TCU "Women in Leadership" program (October 2025), applicable National policies and the SAI Lesotho Gender Policy.

The main objective is to contribute to a strategic framework that ensures the SAI's current female leadership advantage translates into lasting institutional transformation, inspires broader public sector reform and integrating gender perspectives into public auditing.

DEVELOPMENT

1. Contextualization: The Unique Leadership Landscape within Lesotho's SAI

Lesotho has a strong foundation for gender equality, being a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979 and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development, and with domestic instruments like the National Gender and Development Policy (2003) and the landmark Lesotho Gender Equality Act (2022).

Contrary to the common regional barriers that prevents women from rising to higher roles, the SAI shows a strong and encouraging "leadership pillar" at mid-to-senior management levels where women are in the majority. This may suggest targeted professional development, merit-based promotions, and perhaps a supportive cohort effect have successfully elevated a critical mass of women into key operational and strategic roles. The Government of Lesotho's 2025/26 Budget Speech recognised this progress. It noted that while gender inequality remains a national issue, gains in areas like professional institutions should be strengthened and maintained.

However, this positive development must be examined through various perspectives as follows:

- **Is this representation sustained at the very top?** The composition of the Executives Management remains critical to assess for full parity.
- **Does being the majority also mean women have the same level of influence?** Women leaders may still navigate gendered expectations, disproportionate burdens of office administration, or exclusion from informal decision-making networks.
- **What are systemic supports?** The sustainability of this leadership pillar depends on institutionalized policies, mentorship, succession planning, work-life balance that prevent backsliding and prepare the next generation.

Challenges, therefore, are multifaceted:

- **The "Next Step" Barrier:** Even after reaching senior roles women may still face hidden obstacles on the paths of the highest executive's positions.
- **Cultural and Micro aggressive Hurdles:** Even as a majority, women in leadership may face quiet biases or being criticized whether they act assertively ("too aggressive") or supportively ("not strong enough").
- **Structural Complacency:** For instance, if the SAI succeeds in promoting women at one level (like Director), it may become overconfident and stop trying. Instead, it should keep working to prepare more women for future roles and ensure inclusion for all women.

2. Literature Review / Theoretical Framework

The analysis is enriched by concepts from the ProInter-TCU program, applied to SAI's unique context:

- **From Critical Mass to Critical Actors:** Mid-to-senior management levels already exceed the “20% threshold.” The focus now needs to shift toward “critical actors” women in these key positions, who can shape policy, mentor others, and influence the institution's culture. The real question is whether they are empowered to do so.
- **The Troubled leadership role:** Women are often appointed to leadership roles during times of crisis or organisational challenge. It is important to examine whether women in the SAI are being assigned the most difficult or high-risk audit portfolios, which could expose them to greater pressure, scrutiny, and the risk of failure.
- **Personal Branding and Strategic Influence:** With a strong foundation of women in management, the next individual growth area lies in mastering the **4 Axes of Leadership Mapping** particularly Strategic Intelligence and "How-to-Become" to navigate toward executive roles. “Working together through strong networks can further increase their collective influence.
- **Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw):** The experiences of women in the SAI are not uniform. Factors like time in position, professional background (accounting vs. law), and familial responsibilities create differing needs that institutional policies must address to support all women equitably.

3. Relevant Policies, Laws, and Regulations

The SAI works within a supportive environment that both helps it keep its leadership progress and expects it to maintain and build on that success. This ecosystem is strengthened by a key internal instrument:

- a) **The Constitution of Lesotho (Amendment No. 2, 2025):** Strengthening the SAI's independence elevates its role as a model institution. Its internal governance, including demonstrably fair and inclusive leadership pathways, now bears greater scrutiny and symbolic importance.
- b) **Lesotho Gender Equality Act (2022):** This Act provides the legal mandate to not only achieve but also sustain and fundamentally improve gender equality.
- c) **OAG (SAI) Gender Policy:** This internal policy is the operational engine for achieving the goals set by national law. It commits the SAI to mainstreaming gender across all employee lifecycle stages from recruitment and hiring using gender-neutral language and diverse panels, to ensuring equitable compensation, career development, promotion, and supportive leave policies. It establishes principles of gender equity, zero tolerance for discrimination, and provides for support resources like training and counselling. This

policy provides the concrete framework to formalise the SAI's successful practices into standard operating procedures for talent management.

- d) **Public Service Act and Regulations:** To protect and strengthen the current leadership pipeline, the SAI can push for changes in policy or implement them internally that make its successful practices permanent. Many of these practices are already outlined in the SAI Gender Policy.
- e) **2025/26 National Budget Speech:** The Government's focus on gender inequality provides a platform. The SAI can position itself as a case study of success in responding to this national priority, while also using the budget's mandate to seek resources for leadership development programs that prepare its female managers for the highest offices.
- f) **National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) II:** The SAI should start auditing how well gender equality is being promoted across government. The fact that the SAI itself has many women in leadership roles and follows its own Gender Policy shows that these goals are achievable. This will strengthen the SAI's credibility and moral standing when auditing gender issues in other departments.
- g) **International Commitments (CEDAW, SDGs, INTOSAI):** The SAI is now in a strong position to share its experiences on building and keeping women in leadership within audit institutions both in the region and around the world. It can move from simply taking part in international discussions to leading the conversation on diversity, equity, and inclusion within INTOSAI (the International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions).

4. Internal Measures of the SAI: Consolidating Success and Addressing Remaining Gaps

The SAI's achievement at the mid-to-senior management level is a strategic strength. The goal is to analyse, institutionalize, and scale this success, using the SAI Gender Policy as the foundational guide.

Existing Strengths to Build Upon:

- A proven track record of promoting women to executive roles with real decision-making power.
- At these leadership levels, the organization has a culture that values skill, ability, and performance above all else not whether someone is a man or a woman.
- The newly developed SAI Gender Policy, which provides a comprehensive framework for equity across the employee lifecycle.

5. Proposed Institutional Measures for the Next Phase:

a) Operationalise the Gender Policy in Leadership Development:

- Conduct a **"Success Analysis"** to study the career paths of current women in mid-to-senior management roles. By identifying and officially including the factors that helped these women succeed into the SAI's Leadership Development Policy.
- Establish a structured Sponsorship Program as part of the SAI's career development efforts where the Senior Executive guide and advocate for high-potential women being prepared for top executive roles.

b) Ensure Pipeline Sustainability through Policy Implementation:

- Implement a robust succession planning process guided by the policy's focus on equal opportunity, identifying and preparing the next cohort of women at the senior auditor level.
- Use the policy's inclusive approach across all HR activities to make sure they support every woman. This includes examining and improving flexible working options and leave policies.

c) Foster Executive Readiness and Influence:

- Create an Executive Readiness Programme for women in senior levels focusing on skills beyond technical audit competence, as supported by the policy's commitment to professional growth.
- Establish a Women's Leadership Forum within the SAI to provide peer support and advise on policy implementation, creating a feedback loop to strengthen the Gender Policy itself.

d) Leverage Internal Policy for External Credibility:

- Use the experience and influence of women in leadership roles and the support of the Gender Policy to lead the way in advanced gender-focused auditing.

Case Study or Practical Experience: From Managerial Majority to Executive Influence

Consider a female at a mid-management level in SAI Lesotho, part of the current majority. Her empowerment is now underpinned by the institutional SAI Gender Policy. Her strategy should be to actively utilise and champion the policy's provisions:

- **Utilise Policy Frameworks:** Her narrative should leverage the policy's principles, shifting from individual competence to being a **"critical actor"** within a system designed for equity. She should actively participate in the policy's mentorship programs and utilise its support resources.

- **Influence Through Policy Channels:** She can use the 12 techniques of influence to advocate for the full implementation of the Gender Policy within her department, practicing leadership on institutional change.
- **Strategic Networking and Advocacy:** She should build partnerships to present the SAI's Gender Policy as an example to follow. This will increase her impact and establish both her and the SAI as leaders in fair and inclusive governance.

CONCLUSION

The SAI stands at a commendable and rare juncture: it has successfully built a female-majority leadership pillar at the crucial mid-to-senior management level and has codified its commitment in the SAI Gender Policy. This is not the end of the journey, but a solid foundation from which to launch the next phase ensuring this translates into sustained executive parity, qualitative influence, and institutionalised equity.

The main insights from this analysis are:

1. Policy is the backbone of sustainability. The SAI Gender Policy provides the structure to turn informal success into intentional, formalised practice. Its full implementation is the key to institutionalizing gains.
2. The goalposts have moved. The challenge is no longer just about numbers but about leveraging the policy to ensure influence at the top, pipeline sustainability, and an inclusive environment. The SAI must guard against complacency by actively monitoring the policy's impact.
3. Internal policy empowers external mandate. The SAI's unique composition and its formal Gender Policy is a powerful strategic asset. It bolsters credibility to conduct gender-responsive audits and advocate for equity across the public sector, directly supporting national goals.

To consolidate its position as a leader, SAI Lesotho is recommended to:

- Fully implement and champion the SAI Gender Policy, by starting with the "Success Analysis" and formal Sponsorship Programme.
- Launch an Executive Readiness Programme specifically targeting high-potential women managers, using the policy as its mandate.
- Showcase its Gender Policy and results internally and externally, shifting its role in INTOSAI forums from learner to exemplar of policy-driven inclusion.
- Launch a major, high-profile audit focused on gender equality. This audit should draw on the skills and leadership of its women-led teams and the strength of its internal gender policy.

By taking these steps, SAI Lesotho's will transform its current numerical advantage and policy framework into a lasting legacy of inclusive, effective, and transformative leadership fulfilling its constitutional mandate and serving as a beacon for gender equality in Africa and beyond.

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