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EXCHANGE PROGRAM

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR GREATER FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN
LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE

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1.0   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Everywhere, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions globally, across many public-sector audit institutions. Increasing female leadership in a National Audit Office (NAO) improves decision quality, accountability, public trust, and institutional performance. Major barriers include pipeline or entry issues, workplace culture and bias, structural HR and recruitment practices, and external constraints such as political appointments, family care expectations. Concrete opportunities include targeted talent pipelines, transparent promotion metrics, flexible work policies, mentorship and sponsorship programs, gender-sensitive training, and governance changes.

This report will highlight key challenges and opportunities for increasing female participation in organizational leadership, providing insights for organizations to drive change.

2.0 BACKGROUND OF THE PROGRAM

Afrosai – e organizes seminars for women in leadership positions. The third program which was held this year was a hybrid one with online activities from October 6 to 8, 2025, and physical meetings which was held in Pretoria, South Africa, from October 13 to 17, 2025.

The program's target audience was women who hold, or aspire to hold, leadership positions in their Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) affiliated with the Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (OISC-CPLP), the Brazilian Federal Court of Accounts (TCU), and AFROSAI-E (the English-speaking subgroup of the African Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions).

The objectives of the program were:-

a) To develop and disseminate effective external control strategies for public policies related to human rights and the promotion of equity.

b) To share good practices in diversity, inclusion, and gender equality to strengthen the organizational culture of SAIs.

c) To strengthen the network of contacts and cooperation among women leaders in the INTOSAI community.

a) To promote the exchange of experiences and knowledge among women who hold or aspire to hold leadership positions in SAIs.

b) To identify the challenges and opportunities women face in career development and team management.

c) To share TCU's and other Supreme Audit Institutions' good work practices regarding diversity, inclusion, and gender equality.

d) To disseminate the methodology of the Gender Equality Seal for Public Institutions, from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), within the scope of SAIs.

e) To share the practical results of the ProInter experience, based on the preparation of a final paper from participation in the Program.

f) To foster the building of a network of women leaders within the INTOSAI community, through the sharing of good practices and the search for solutions to common challenges.

3.0 SCHEDULE OF THE ACTIVITY

3.1 Online Schedule

Under this program, the meeting was held online from 6th to 8th October, 2025. During this time, the general presentation of the program was done, exchange of experience was also done. The relationship between budgetary decisions and the promotion of gender equality.

3.2 Physical Participation

The physical participation was held in Pretoria, South Africa from 13th to 17th October, 2025.

4.0 REASONS TO DIVERSE LEADERSHIP

a) It helps in the performance and oversight because diverse leadership produces better risk identification, broader perspectives on audit priorities, and stronger scrutiny of public spending decisions.
b) It also strengthen legitimacy and public trust since representative leadership builds public confidence that institutions reflect to the society which shows citizen accountability.

5.0   OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

5.1   Challenges

5.1.1   Pipeline and recruitment

- There is low entry or uneven recruitment **i**nto audit and finance streams for women which is due to low education and career choices, unawareness of audit career paths. This result into having more male auditors than women. Hence more men in managerial positions.
- Concentrations of women in junior positions resulting into fewer women in technical or specialized audit fields that feed leadership. For instance, there are a lot of women in the junior positions leading to few senior positions.

5.1.2   Promotion & performance evaluation practices

- Opaque promotion criteria and informal networks often advantage incumbents and those well connected, disadvantaging women who may have fewer sponsorship ties.
- Bias in performance assessments — e.g., women judged on style or "fit" rather than outcomes; they are penalized for assertiveness or rewarded less for collaboration.

5.1.3   Work–life and flexibility constraints

- Rigid working hours, location-based norms, and punitive parental-leave policies prevents women especially during child bearing age from competing for leadership roles.
- Clocking up-time bias also prevents women from being promoted since panels valuing uninterrupted full-time tenure disadvantage those with career breaks. Therefore, ladies are disadvantaged because of interrupted time for child caring and bearing.

5.1.4   Organizational culture and informal networks

- Male-dominated senior cadres and old-boys' networks reduce opportunities for visibility and sponsorship.
- Unconscious micro-behaviors and stereotype threat reduce women's confidence and willingness to pursue leadership roles.

5.1.5   Appointment & governance environment

- Political or patronage appointment systems can reduce meritocratic pathways and can reflect broader societal gender imbalances.

- Limited gender targets or legal mandates (or ineffective ones) mean change is voluntary and slow.

5.1.6 Skills, development and visibility gaps

- Leadership often requires non-technical skills (stakeholder management, public profile) that women may have fewer opportunities to practice or showcase.

5.1.7 Husbands :

The husbands, who were habitually accepted as the house holders at local and grass root levels, influenced women to manage only the activities at home. Husbands never allowed their consort to participate on any issues out of home with their colleagues and within the local governance. The participants explained that husbands were not willing to appreciate women work out of home. This finding is supported by Gochhayat (2013) who asserted that the husband at home influence women from taking part in decision-making and politics. (Agenagn Kebede, (October 25, 2019)

5.2 OPPORTUNITIES & STRATEGIES

5.2.1 Strengthen the talent pipeline

- Outreach & early recruitment: partner with universities (finance, accounting, public administration) and run women-targeted internships, scholarships, and awareness campaigns about NAO careers.
- Rotate assignments: ensure women gain exposure to specialized audit areas (IT, forensic, performance) and to high-visibility projects.

5.2.2 Transparent, competency-based promotion pathways

- Define clear competency frameworks for each leadership level with observable metrics (scope of responsibility, team outcomes, audit quality indicators).
- Publish promotion criteria and vacancy adverts internally; use structured interviews and scoring rubrics to reduce subjectivity.

5.2.3 Sponsorship and mentoring programs

- Sponsorship: assign senior leaders (both male and female) to actively sponsor high-potential women — advocates who open doors to assignments and promotions.

- Mentoring networks: cross-cohort mentoring (peers and near-peers) and leadership coaching for women at mid-career levels.

5.2.4   Flexible work & family-friendly policies

- The organize should formalize flexible working such as part-time, compressed week, remote options or online working for leadership roles where possible, with clear rules to reduce stigma.
- Progressive parental leave and return-to-work programs such as phased return, catch-up training to retain and accelerate women's progression after leave.

5.2.5   Bias reduction & leadership culture change

- Unconscious bias training for promotion panels and managers — combined with process changes (structured feedback) rather than one-off sessions.
- Diversity in interview and promotion panels to avoid homogenous decision-making.
- There should be leadership accountability where managers need to report on gender diversity in their teams and on development actions.

5.2.6   Governance & appointment reforms

There should be governance and appointment reforms to ensure equal distribution in positions. This should include:-

- Meritocratic appointment mechanisms (transparent shortlisting, publicised selection criteria) for senior NAO positions.
- Use of shortlists with gender balance requirements for external recruitments and public appointments.
- Consider time-limited targets for instance 40% women in senior management within such number of years and these should have been with published.

5.2.7   Visibility, role models and institutional messaging

- Highlight female leaders' work (case studies, media, speaking opportunities) to provide role models and normalise female authority.
- Internal leadership development cohorts that raise women's profile with the Comptroller/Auditor General and stakeholders.

5.2.8   Capacity development and technical training

- Leadership bootcamps focused on stakeholder engagement, media training, and political navigation — skills critical for NAO leaders.
- Technical upskilling in emerging areas (IT audit, data analytics) to ensure women can lead modern audit functions.

6.0   RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations can be of short term or medium-term action as follows:-

6.1   Short term (0–12 months)

1. Develop a gender-diversity diagnostic which should outline current gender breakdown by grade, promotion rates, leave patterns, attrition.
2. Set out near-term targets for representation at next-level management with clear owners.
3. Start sponsorship pilots (two cohorts) with measurable goals (e.g., three sponsored women to be in promotion pool in 12 months).
4. Mandate structured promotion panels and rubrics.

6.1.1   Medium term (12–36 months)

1. Roll out flexible leadership role policy and evaluate uptake/impact.
2. Embed leadership development programme for female and diverse candidates with secondments to high-profile audits.
3. Revise appointment processes for senior external hires to require gender-balanced shortlists.
4. Public reporting of progress in annual report and performance dashboards.

6.1.2   Measurement and success indicators

- **Quantitative KPIs:** % women at senior grades (Director, Deputy Auditor General), % women shortlisted for senior posts, promotion rate by gender, retention after parental leave, time to promotion.
- **Qualitative KPIs:** staff survey results on perceived fairness, inclusion scores, incidence of reported micro-aggressions.
- **Process KPIs:** % promotion panels using structured rubrics, % roles advertised internally, uptake of flexible work arrangements.

6.1.3   Conclusion

In conclusion, increasing female leadership in National Audit Office - SAI is achievable with a pragmatic mix of pipeline strengthening, transparent HR practices, sponsorship, flexible work options, and governance reforms. Success requires leadership commitment, measurable targets,

and sustained cultural change but the payoff is greater institutional performance, legitimacy, and public trust. This can only occur when Management is determined.

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