

Supporting Women's Career Progression in Facilities Management

2 months ago



Women form a significant proportion of the facilities management workforce, particularly in frontline roles; however, long-term progression and visibility remain uneven. Jo Gilliard, [CEO of Jangro](#), explores the structural and cultural changes needed to ensure FM becomes a profession where women can build long-term, rewarding careers.

Facilities management is an industry that quite literally keeps the country running. From hospitals and schools to offices, airports and public buildings, FM underpins public health, safety and productivity. Yet despite its scale and significance, the sector continues to fall short when it comes to consistent professional recognition and clearly structured advancement pathways.

[Labour market data](#) highlights a clear gender divide within the cleaning workforce. Across general cleaning roles, women account for around two-thirds of operatives and domestic workers. Across the wider facilities management profession, workforce data shows overall gender representation is more mixed than in frontline cleaning roles, although the profession remains [male-majority overall](#). The challenge for the sector is ensuring that representation at entry and operational levels is matched by consistent progression into management and leadership roles.

This is not only a diversity issue, it also represents a workforce sustainability issue. Career progression is shaped by a range of factors, from personal circumstances and workplace flexibility to organisational culture, and experiences vary across organisations and individuals. While gender may have historically influenced opportunities in some parts of the profession, career progression is now shaped more by a complex mix of structural and personal factors. However, when representation at operational level does not consistently translate into leadership roles, it highlights the need to review how progression is

structured and supported across the profession. If we are to strengthen FM for the long term, we must address the structural and cultural barriers that continue to affect women's career progression and retention for those who seek it.

Recognising frontline contribution

Despite women forming a significant proportion of the frontline workforce, one of the greatest barriers they face in facilities management is visibility. Cleaning operatives have historically worked outside core business hours, often early mornings or late evenings. While daytime cleaning models do exist, many teams still work in the background.

This lack of visibility feeds a wider perception problem. If the work is not seen, it is not always valued. During the pandemic, frontline cleaning operatives were rightly recognised as essential to public safety and infection prevention. However, as time has passed, this recognition has once again faded with the professional standing of the role.

When frontline colleagues – many of whom are women – are excluded from workplace communications or strategic discussions, it sends a clear message that the work is necessary but not influential. That perception shapes how roles are rewarded, how development is prioritised, and how progression pathways are structured.

Professionalising the sector requires us to challenge that mindset. A cleaning operative managing infection control protocols, COSHH compliance, auditing processes and site logistics is exercising leadership judgement. These are accountable responsibilities that directly support business continuity and employee wellbeing. If we describe such roles as low-skilled, we undermine both the individuals performing them and the credibility and professional standing of the sector itself.

Professionalisation requires structure. Accredited training, defined competency frameworks and visible inclusion in organisational decision making all help to strengthen professional identity and formalise expertise. When roles are structured, recognised and understood as skilled work, they become credible stepping stones to future opportunity. That shift is essential if women in frontline roles are to see an attainable route into management and leadership.

Career progression and retention

Professional recognition must translate into structured opportunities, as improved visibility alone does not automatically lead to advancement. In too many cases, progression relies on discretionary decisions rather than clearly defined criteria. Without transparent standards and structured development frameworks, advancement depends too heavily on individual managers rather than sector-wide expectations. As a result, talented women can remain in operational roles for years without a clear view of how to move into supervisory, managerial or strategic positions.

Facilities management offers diverse career paths in operations, procurement, compliance, digital systems and leadership. Yet for many women entering through frontline roles, the route upwards is not clearly mapped. If we want more women progressing into management, we need to map those routes visibly and consistently. Structured development programmes should not be dependent on who happens to be managing a contract at a given time.

Retention is also closely linked to progression. When roles lack security and stability, long-term careers become harder to sustain. Research shows that [61% of cleaning workers](#) experienced pay-related issues, including underpayment and unlawful deductions. Almost half reported having no access to sick pay, and more than one in five said they never felt able to take time off when ill. The same study found that 86% had experienced work-related health issues.

These figures should concern the entire industry. If we expect professionalism and want to retain skilled women in the sector, we must provide professional conditions. Fair pay, ethical employment and secure contracts are foundational to long-term retention. Without consistent standards and accountability across supply chains, progression will remain fragile, and careers will remain uncertain.

Securing the future workforce

Alongside gender imbalance, the sector faces a demographic challenge. [Only around 11% of the cleaning workforce is under 25](#), while the proportion of workers aged over 50 is [higher than the national average](#). Experience strengthens the profession, but without generational renewal, workforce gaps will widen.

Attracting younger women into facilities management is therefore essential. The profession requires clearer entry routes and stronger early engagement. Greater exposure in schools, colleges and technical education pathways would help young people understand the breadth of opportunity available.

Facilities management today spans AI, data, ESG, sustainability, marketing, compliance and leadership. It offers structured career development and long-term security, but those pathways need to be visible and accessible from the outset. Apprenticeships provide a practical entry point while reinforcing professional standards. Structured apprenticeship programmes signal that FM is a career with recognised qualifications and progression from the outset.

Without deliberate action on entry and progression, the sector will face workforce pressures and struggle to build the pipeline of female talent it needs.

Leadership and accountability

While there are strong female leaders across facilities management, representation at senior level does not always mirror the composition of the [wider operational workforce](#). Leadership visibility sends a powerful message, and when women see others who have progressed, it creates a broader sense of what is possible.

As someone who has progressed from operational roles into executive leadership, I recognise that visibility carries responsibility. Part of that responsibility is ensuring leadership pathways are clearly defined and accessible to those entering the profession. My own progression reflects the value of gaining broad operational experience and maintaining a clear commitment to professional development.

Importantly, this is not an isolated example. Within our own leadership team, six of our eight senior roles are held by women, and in other organisations where leadership teams reflect balanced representation, that balance is rarely accidental. Instead, it is typically the result of recognising talent, experience and performance through transparent standards. When organisational support aligns with individual capability and ambition, progression becomes sustainable rather than exceptional.

Achieving this requires engagement across the sector. Progression and retention depend on consistent standards, and we all share responsibility for upholding fair and ethical employment. If facilities management is to offer long-term careers for women, commercial decisions must support workforce stability. This is about building a profession that can attract, retain and develop the people it depends on.

A clear path forward

Facilities management has an opportunity to strengthen itself by improving how progression is structured and how contribution is recognised. Women already make a substantial contribution across the workforce, particularly in frontline roles. Supporting women's progression and ensuring that women's contribution is visible, valued and supported by clear development pathways is both a professional and commercial priority for the FM sector.

The changes required are not complex. Progression must be structured, standards must be consistent, and employment practices must support long-term careers. Creating inclusive environments where opportunity is open and expectations are transparent enables individuals to take ownership of their own development. When organisational support and individual capability align, barriers are reduced and progression becomes more accessible and embedded rather than exceptional.

Supporting women's career progression is not a standalone initiative. It is part of building a profession that recognises its workforce, upholds fair standards and invests in long-term capability.