

# Women's careers get a lift from Rotary

# Female members make professional connections, develop new skills, and get inspired to set ambitious goals

By **Etelka Lehoczky** with additional reporting by **Seoha Lee**

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As an online Rotary meeting starts one day in July, it soon becomes clear that it's typical in every way but one. The brightly colored squares appear onscreen, each showing a member from a different corner of the world. They join from Nigeria, Canada, Thailand, Norway, and more than a dozen other countries, and all the participants are women.

Today the topic is how Rotary membership has helped everyone's careers. Some of the women tell how they've benefited from Rotary projects, clubs, or scholarships.

"My Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship helped me go from [working for] newspapers to TV and radio," says RI Director Eve Conway-Ghazi, a journalist from England. "Through a Rotary contact, I started doing documentaries about fighting breast cancer in Pakistan."

Others talk about the skills they've gained by working on Rotary projects.

"I have become more mature by going to different communities and understanding their issues," says Geeta Manek, a past trustee of The Rotary Foundation who lives in Kenya. "If I had not been a member of Rotary, I might have given a small check here and there, but I wouldn't have understood the challenges these communities face and how we can address [underlying] causes."

This is a networking group of about 35 women who have served Rotary as trustees or directors or in other leadership roles. It was organized during the

COVID-19 pandemic by Johrita Solari, a former RI vice president and director from the United States. The discussions are usually wide-ranging, addressing everything from ongoing projects to personal and career matters.

“It’s about having conversations on how to be better than we are and how to support each other,” Solari says.

Our research shows that women find a variety of networking opportunities through Rotary:

- 61% of female members who participated in Rotary Fellowships did so in part to find professional contacts. 84% of them said the fellowship they participated in met their expectations.
- 65% of female members who participated in Rotary Action Groups did so in part to find professional contacts. 85% of them said the action group they participated in met their expectations.
- 68% of female members who participated in a Rotary Friendship Exchange did so in part to find professional contacts. 97% of them said the exchange met their expectations.

This gathering is just one of the many ways women in Rotary form valuable professional relationships. Some join the Rotary Means Business Fellowship, which facilitates networking. Others join Rotary Action Groups or participate in Rotary Friendship Exchanges to make connections. Many women say Rotary helps them establish professional contacts, expand their skills, and — perhaps most important of all — find the inspiration to set higher goals for themselves.

# An imperfect business world

The chance to make connections and gain new skills is particularly crucial for women in the business world. Despite having cemented their place in the workforce in many countries, women still encounter barriers to advancement. Globally, less than a third of companies' leadership positions are estimated to be held by women, according to a [report by career site LinkedIn](#). That's despite the fact that women fill half or more of entry-level roles.

"Because we're a predominantly patriarchal society, I think men tend to gravitate towards their fellow men as opposed to women" in the professional world, says Sybil Bailor, an immediate past club president from Sierra Leone. She works in project management and runs a boutique hotel. "There are certain do's and don'ts, spoken or unspoken, when you're approaching men in terms of networking and business," she adds.

Those protocols often aren't made clear to women, and there are other challenges. Men may assume that the only woman in a meeting will take notes, even if she outranks some men there. Executives might gather after work in places that aren't welcoming to, or comfortable for, women. There may be unwritten rules about what women should wear. That's what one Rotarian learned when she showed up for her new job at a law firm in the United Kingdom.

"I was the head of the Turkish department, so I was paying more attention to my clothes," says Funda Göğebakan, the president of a club in Turkey. "On my first day, I had on a red dress. They said, 'Yeah, you look good. But according to our firm's rules, we advise you strongly to choose gray or black ones.'"

## The "original networking organization"

One source of frustration for women in some countries is being excluded from social events outside of work. That's why it's essential to find other networking opportunities, says Hyun-Sook Lee, a past president of a club in Korea.

"In Korea, after-work gatherings, especially those involving alcohol, are a big part of professional networking and information sharing," says Lee, who heads a local branch of a chain of movie theaters. "These gatherings were often where relationships were built and crucial information was exchanged. I don't drink alcohol and have rarely attended these events, which has sometimes made me feel like I was missing out on important opportunities to network and advance my career."

That's where Rotary comes in. Besides offering a way to make professional connections in mixed-gender settings, Rotary membership provides many other networking opportunities. About two-thirds of female members who participated in Rotary Action Groups, Rotary Fellowships, or Friendship Exchanges did so in part to make professional connections.

"Rotary was the original networking organization," says RI President Stephanie A. Urchick, who is from the United States. "The basic principle behind networking has always been the same: It's about relationship building. Rotary is a place where people all have that DNA that says, 'We want to serve, we want to make the world a better place.' That's not always true in other circles."

Rotary's international nature presents many opportunities too. Past RI Director Suzi Howe, who established a Montessori school in the USA, says she has often used her Rotary connections to introduce her students to international guests.

"I had a [Rotary Youth] Exchange student from Russia come and visit the school, and a Nicaraguan children's choir," says Howe. "The internationality of Rotary is a gift that we have."

## **A priceless MBA**

Many women credit Rotary with helping them develop as leaders. In Solari's online meeting, Nicki Scott, a former RI director and vice president from England, says Rotary can help women overcome a fear of taking charge.

“Being brave enough to step into leadership roles teaches you so much. It’s a priceless MBA of leadership skills,” Scott says.

For women who own businesses, Rotary membership offers a chance to learn from other entrepreneurs. Manjoo Phadke, who received Rotary’s 2024 **Sylvia Whitlock Leadership Award**, says most of the members in her district are business owners.

“Very few of them are working for somebody else. So they have seen it all and done it all,” says Phadke, a past district governor from India who runs a vocational school for lower-income students.

Others say the leadership style they learn in Rotary is more powerful than what is typically found in the corporate world.

“When you are in a corporate job, you can command people, right? But not when you are in Rotary,” says Joanne Kam, a past district governor from Singapore. She works in real estate and founded a wellness company. “You don’t give out salaries. Everyone is here to serve. So you have to inspire and motivate in a different way.”

Mentorship is yet another benefit of Rotary, and it’s something women often lack in their professional lives. Only around 27% of women in senior leadership positions around the world report ever having had a formal mentor, according to a **2024 study by the consulting firm DDI**. That’s compared to 38% of men.

“One of the strongest things that we can do for each other in Rotary is mentoring,” Urchick says. It’s a topic she’s familiar with after decades working as both an administrator in higher education and a leadership consultant. “It can be within the club. It could be in the community. There are some Rotary clubs that do mentoring in high schools or in middle schools.”

Ultimately, it’s clear that membership in Rotary confers something perhaps more valuable than professional connections or business lessons: a sense of possibility that many women didn’t feel before they joined.

That spirit pervades today's online meeting. The participants had planned to discuss career accomplishments, but few limit themselves to that narrow definition of personal satisfaction. They speak not just of connections and opportunities, but of inspiration and imagination. There's something about Rotary's unique combination of relationship-building and service that expands their sense of what they can achieve.

"I've personally gained by being more empathetic, more tolerant, more patient. Rotary teaches you all that," Manek says. "It starts with trust. There's so much more to Rotary than just doing projects. We empower ourselves."

Learn about how Rotary [supports women's entrepreneurship](#) and [facilitates networking for all members](#).

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