



Women Leaders in Public Funds, Enhancing Governance, Innovation and Agility

Public funds sit at the center of some of the most important fiduciary obligations in the economy. They safeguard retirement security, invest long-duration capital, oversee complex portfolios, protect sensitive beneficiary data, and operate under intense public scrutiny. In that environment, leadership is not merely about title or tenure. It is about judgment, resilience, accountability, and trust. That is why the topic of women leaders in public funds is not a symbolic discussion. It is a governance discussion.

At Opal's Public Funds East conference, the panel "Women Leaders in Public Funds – Driving Innovation, Governance, and Inclusion" brings together perspectives from investment leadership, board governance, finance, and privacy. The central question is not simply whether more women should lead public funds. The more important question is: what institutional capabilities do women leaders bring, and how should public funds build leadership systems that make those capabilities visible, scalable, and durable? The timing matters. The global leadership environment remains uneven. The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2025* continues to benchmark persistent gaps in economic participation, education, health, and political empowerment, reinforcing that gender parity remains a long-term challenge, not a completed project.ⁱ

Within investment management, the gaps remain especially material. Pensions & Investments' (P&I) survey of money managers reports women represent <40% of their workforce. That is not just a representation issue. It

is a talent-risk issue. Public funds need leaders who can navigate investment volatility, contribution pressure, actuarial uncertainty, privacy threats, AI adoption, political oversight, beneficiary communications, and operational modernization. The narrower the leadership pipeline, the greater the institutional risk. The broader and more inclusive the pipeline, the stronger the organization's ability to surface blind spots and govern through complexity.ⁱⁱ

Innovation Requires Governance, Not Hype

Innovation is a critical element for public funds. Artificial intelligence (AI) is affecting research, manager monitoring, portfolio analytics, reporting, communications, fraud detection, and workflow automation. But AI is not only a technology issue. It is a governance issue. NIST's AI Risk Management Framework emphasizes governance, mapping, measurement, and management of AI-related risks, while McKinsey highlights AI's potential to reshape the economics of asset management.ⁱⁱⁱ

For public funds, the core question is not "Can we use AI?" It is: "Who is accountable when AI influences a fiduciary decision?" Women leaders across investment, finance, operations, privacy, and governance are well positioned to insist on that discipline. Innovation must be explainable. It must be documented. It must protect confidential data. It must improve judgment rather than replace it. The best leaders are neither reckless adopters nor passive skeptics. They are disciplined translators. They connect new tools to existing fiduciary obligations.

Privacy and Cybersecurity Are Now Board-Level Trust Issues

Public funds and related public institutions hold highly sensitive information: employee data, retiree records, health information, payroll data, bank details, and confidential investment records. A privacy failure is not simply an operational event. It is a trust event. NIST's Cybersecurity Framework 2.0 provides a useful governance architecture for public institutions: identify, protect, detect, respond, recover, and govern.^{iv}

For boards and senior leaders, the practical challenge is translating technical cyber and privacy risks into oversight language. That means asking: Where is our most sensitive data? Who has access to it? What third parties handle it? How are AI tools using it? What is prohibited? What happens in the first 24 hours of an incident? How would we explain our response to beneficiaries, regulators, legislators, and the public? Women leaders in privacy, legal, finance, technology, and governance can help public funds make this conversation more integrated. Privacy is not a department. It is a public-trust obligation.

Financial Leadership Is Mission Leadership

Public-fund finance leadership is also changing. CFOs and finance executives are no longer responsible only for budgets, audits, and controls. They help connect mission, funding, operations, reporting, investment governance, and stakeholder accountability. Pew has emphasized the importance of transparency in public pension governance, including clear reporting and accountability structures.^v

In practice, this means public funds need financial leaders who can explain trade-offs plainly: How do we fund cybersecurity? How do we modernize systems? How do we maintain controls while accelerating technology adoption? How do we report risks without creating unnecessary alarm? How do we protect beneficiaries while operating under budget constraints? Financial leadership in public funds is therefore mission leadership. It protects institutional credibility.

Inclusion Must Be Measurable

Inclusion is operationalized in hiring, promotion, committee assignments, manager selection, consultant evaluation, succession planning, and board composition. The CFA Institute Inclusion Code provides an investment-industry framework built around pipeline, talent acquisition, promotion and retention, leadership, influence, and measurement.^{vi} Measurement matters because public funds are fiduciary organizations. Good intentions are not enough. Leaders should ask: Who gets stretch assignments? Who presents to the board? Who manages risk-bearing portfolios? Who leads technology implementation? Who sits on manager-selection committees? Who is being sponsored, not merely mentored?

In capital allocation, the same discipline applies. Knight Foundation research and related work have shown that women- and diverse-owned asset-management firms remain underrepresented in U.S. AUM. Fiduciary-safe inclusion program does not lower standards. It broadens sourcing, challenges legacy filters, improves data, reviews minimum-AUM thresholds, holds consultants accountable for pipeline breadth, and evaluates performance rigorously.^{vii}

The Next Leadership Test

The next generation of public-fund leadership will be tested by complexity: AI adoption, demographic shifts, market volatility, privacy threats, beneficiary expectations, geopolitical shocks, and public distrust of institutions. Women leaders are already helping public funds meet that test. But organizations must move from celebrating individual success stories to building repeatable leadership systems. That means sponsorship, not just mentorship. It means measurable advancement, not informal encouragement. It means board exposure, investment committee participation, operational responsibility, privacy and cyber authority, CFO-level influence, and succession planning that recognizes future leadership needs.

The question for trustees, treasurers, investment managers, actuaries, CFOs, and public-fund executives is straightforward: Are we building institutions that can attract, retain, promote, and listen to the full range of leadership talent required to protect beneficiaries? Women's leadership in public funds is not about optics. It is about governance capacity, innovation discipline, fiduciary resilience, and public trust.

LinkedIn Hook

Women's leadership in public funds is a key element in enhancing governance, innovation, privacy, investment, and beneficiary trust. It was an honor to serve on a panel at Opal Public Funds East, moderated by Michigan's @LeAnn, and including @Jillean and @Catherine, to discuss how women leaders are strengthening fiduciary

oversight, modernizing public institutions, and building more inclusive leadership pipelines for the next generation of public capital stewardship. With gratitude to Opal's leaders, @Daniela and @Ingrid, for superb coordination, and the participants for engaged and thought-provoking questions.

#PublicFunds #WomenInLeadership #InstitutionalInvesting #PensionGovernance #PublicPensions
#FiduciaryDuty #Innovation #Cybersecurity #Privacy #Inclusion #AssetManagement #BoardGovernance
#RetirementSecurity

ⁱ <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/>

ⁱⁱ <https://nctr.org/nctr-congratulates-pis-influential-women-in-institutional-investing-for-2025/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nist.gov/itl/ai-risk-management-framework> and <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/financial-services/our-insights/how-ai-could-reshape-the-economics-of-the-asset-management-industry>

^{iv} <https://www.nist.gov/cyberframework>

^v <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2024/03/25/how-to-ensure-transparency-in-public-employee-pension-fund-governance>

^{vi} <https://rpc.cfainstitute.org/codes-and-standards/inclusion-code>

^{vii} <https://www.diverseassetmanagers.org/news/new-knight-foundation-study-shows-women-and-people-of-color-remain-woefully-underrepresented-in-the-asset-management-industry>