

*Mia Shah-Dand is CEO of Lighthouse3, where she advises global organisations on responsible AI. She is also the founder of Women in AI Ethics, which highlights women's contributions in the tech industry through the annual 100 Brilliant Women in AI Ethics list.*

**Your work with Women in AI Ethics has been pivotal in amplifying diverse voices in the field. What specific challenges have you encountered in promoting this inclusivity, and how have you navigated them?**

A significant challenge is the persistent bias in the tech industry that defines an “AI expert” as a white male engineer. This narrow definition often means that women, regardless of their qualifications, have to work harder to prove themselves and are frequently held to higher standards. Their contributions often go unheard or unrecognised, which can contribute to a sense of imposter syndrome, reinforced by an industry that undervalues them.

To combat this, we have focused on creating platforms like the “100 Brilliant Women in AI Ethics” list, where recognition is based not on traditional credentials, but on the actual contributions women have made to further ethical practices and uplift other lesser-heard voices. This list intentionally includes women from a wide range of backgrounds such as HR, law, and human rights. We recently published a report featuring 40 interviews with women, showcasing not only their achievements but their academic and professional backgrounds, helping to shed the perception that expertise in AI is limited to technical roles. Our goal is to meet women where they are, celebrating their contributions on their own terms, and ensuring they are normalised as experts – not outliers – in the field.

**The 100 Brilliant Women in AI Ethics list is a significant effort in recognising female contributions. How has this initiative evolved since its inception in 2018, and how do you ensure it remains inclusive and representative of the diverse voices in AI ethics each year?**

The 100 Brilliant Women in AI Ethics list has been carefully curated to ensure it reflects the rich diversity within this field. We pay close attention to the geographical distribution of the women we include, ensuring that voices from



various regions are represented. It is not just about the topics these women work on, but the tangible impact of their research. Our goal has always been to move beyond creating just another list of computer scientists. We are very intentional about focusing on women in AI *ethics*, deliberately shifting the spotlight from the builders of AI technologies to those engaged in governance, policy, and ethical considerations. Our philosophy, and the community we foster through our events, encourage women to nominate both themselves and others. We also strive to encourage broader participation and recognition through outreach events, continuously working to involve more women in this critical conversation.

**How does the lack of female perspectives in AI development lead to harmful outcomes, and why is it crucial to include women in these teams? Could you share examples of the negative impacts from their absence?**

This issue is central to how we understand and approach diversity in AI. I strongly push back against the notion that there needs to be a business justification for including women or other underrepresented groups in technology development. Women and other marginalised communities should be included not because of what they contribute, but because they deserve to be treated as human beings with human

rights. Biases in technology often stem from lack of representation in training data and on technology teams, further highlighting the importance of diversity. When more women and people of colour are involved, they tend to notice issues that the predominant majority might overlook. For instance, facial recognition technology has been notoriously ineffective for dark-skinned women, who have been historically underrepresented on technology teams and in AI training datasets. Women have often been the pioneers in the AI ethics space precisely because they are the ones who recognise that these systems do not represent them or their needs and can be harmful to marginalised communities. It is crucial that we normalise equal representation not only in the technical development of AI but also in determining which problems we choose to address in the first place. Diversity should not be an afterthought or retrofitted into existing systems; it is foundational to the way these technologies are designed and developed.

**How do you envision the future of AI ethics and equality evolving over the next decade? What key milestones should the industry aim for?**

I envision a future where women are not mere participants but leaders in the tech industry, especially in AI. It is essential that women move beyond just being “worker bees” and hold positions of real influence and decision-making power. Participation in the tech workforce alone is not enough especially if women lack agency or the ability to shape outcomes in meaningful ways. To achieve this, we need more programmes that systematically support women in reaching these leadership positions at tech companies. There is a significant gap between the few women who have managed to break through against all odds and the systemic barriers that continue to hold back many others. Funding equity is also critical to address this gap. It is troubling that studies have shown how women are never considered the right age for leadership, deemed too young or too old at various stages of their careers. In the coming years, the industry should seek to overcome these biases and ensure that women of all ages and from all socio-economic backgrounds have the support they need to succeed at every stage of their careers.

**Given your experience advising large organisations on responsible innovation, what are some common pitfalls these organisations encounter when trying to adopt ethical AI practices, and how can they overcome them?**

I have helped large organisations adopt new technologies responsibly for over a decade and during this time I have seen many of them struggle with the same or similar issues. The most common organisational pitfall is making technology decisions based on hype and not business objectives. Especially when it comes to AI, it is treated as an exception to all business and governance rules. There is a disturbing lack of due diligence in ensuring that these technologies are developed ethically and that they do not pose a risk to the organisation. This is why my AI literacy and training workshops include background on how these systems are developed along with solid guidance for organisational users on proactively managing and preventing risks from AI. Another growing issue is the popularity of post-deployment audits and “redteaming”, which obscure the critical need to introduce ethical practices right at the start of the innovation process and not as an afterthought. Last but not the least, organisational leaders must acknowledge the vital importance of cross-functional and multidisciplinary expertise. Prioritising inclusion of diverse perspectives early in the AI development lifecycle will help them avoid ethical blind spots inherent in decisions made by homogeneous teams dominated by technology builders and developers.

**Book recommendation**

There’s a growing list of books available on AI Ethics but Cathy O’Neil’s book *“Weapons of Math Destruction”* is a good place to start if you are new to this space. Mary Gray and Siddharth Suri’s *“Ghost Work”* provides a good insight into how an invisible workforce powers the web and these supposedly intelligent technologies. I would also recommend *“Invisible Women”* by Caroline Criado Perez and *“Data Feminism”* by Lauren Klein and Catherine D’Ignazio, which explain in great detail how bias is embedded in datasets used to train AI models, which later manifest as harmful outcomes.