

# Empowering women in leadership & decision-making

## *Critically addressing conscious & unconscious biases*

*Women are underrepresented in decision-making processes in research performing organisations. With recent reports stating the EU will reach gender equality in 60 years, there is plenty of work to do right now. The MINDtheGEPs project works to deconstruct the gendered bias that men make better leaders, to introduce gender equality targets in key decision-making bodies at partner institutions and as a result keep European research competitive.*

*With these recommendations, we support gender equality in research by showing research performing organisations and teams how they can work to counter the pervasive belief that women self-select towards inequality, that they lack confidence and competitiveness, and prioritize family over career, and that this is what causes their choice of research fields, time allocation between research and teaching, and publishing strategies. These recommendations also challenge the notion that leadership is associated with masculine traits.*

We focus on three things to provide actionable measures for research organisations to create a fairer and more inclusive leadership environment.

1. Challenging gender stereotypes about leadership.
2. Promoting comprehensive gender awareness training, revising and diversifying selection criteria.
3. Enhancing the visibility of successful women.

By adopting these measures, organisations can unlock the full potential of diverse talent, foster a culture of inclusivity, and drive positive change towards gender equality in the workplace: ensuring fair opportunities for all candidates and contributing to a more equitable and supportive work environment which in turn leads to more and better innovation and increased productivity.



This brief contains a series of recommendations and a compilation of initiatives from different organisations and offers guidance on how to deal with gender imbalances in research organisations. But there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Organisations come in different shapes and sizes. These recommendations are a selection to pick and choose from to tackle the unique gender equality challenges.

**Cite as:** Antequera, Gema, Holm Bodin, Anna. & Lomba Pérez, Adrián. (2024) Empowering women in leadership & decision-making: Critically addressing conscious & unconscious biases. Zenodo. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10912092

# Challenge gender stereotypes about leadership

Leadership are qualities being gender-neutral in theory, but in reality, most leaders are men. Sexist stereotypes and biases perpetuate this, which is why women often choose not to pursue leadership positions. The pervasive belief that masculine traits are required for effective leadership is a significant barrier for women. MINDtheGEPs data clearly illustrates the disproportionate representation of men in leadership, confirming the experiences reported by female researchers in our surveys and interviews. Motherhood further exacerbates this inequality, with caregiving responsibilities affecting women's career trajectories greatly, which cannot be explained by maternity leave alone.

## How to challenge stereotypes about leadership

- Challenge gender stereotypes associated with leadership. Utilize data to highlight gender disparities in leadership roles.
  - Promote diversity management and leadership initiatives.
  - Encourage women to apply for decision-making positions.
  - Emphasize gender-neutral leadership qualities.
  - Mitigate the impact of motherhood penalties.
  - Implement mentorship programs like Aurora (a women's leadership development programme actioned under Advance HE) to support women's career advancement.
  - Ensure mentors are committed to supporting mentees' development. It fosters trust, consistency, and empowerment, providing a foundation for constructive relationships.
- This commitment maximizes learning opportunities, enhances mentees' confidence, and facilitates career advancement in supportive environments.
- Learn from successful programs such as AKKA (a programme, launched in 2004 by Lund University as an attempt to raise gender knowledge and awareness and provide methods and tools for structural change in leadership positions).
  - Foster an inclusive environment conducive to women's leadership.
  - Provide tools for structural change to achieve gender equality in leadership.

# Comprehensive gender awareness training - for all

Rather than solely targeting women, we advocate for inclusive training programs to promote gender equality in decision-making and leadership. Comprehensive awareness training facilitates smoother implementation of initiatives and fosters understanding among employees. Research highlights a lack of awareness regarding gender equality measures, emphasizing the need for education for all. Data shows strong support for awareness measures. Examples include mandatory online training at the University of Gdansk, gender awareness training at Munster Technological University, and training opportunities for all staff at CTAG, Spain.

## How to successfully implement gender equality training

- Implementing gender equality training for all employees, irrespective of gender or position.
- Ensuring training covers measures, tools, and existing policies related to gender equality.
- Addressing discrimination prevention, including sexual harassment and mobbing, through awareness initiatives.
- Incorporating mandatory online training, as exemplified by the University of Gdansk, to promote gender balance in decision-making.
- Extending training beyond academic institutions to include private organisations like CTAG.
- Acknowledging the favourable reception of such measures, as evidenced by survey data.

## Revise and diversify selection criteria

Reevaluating selection criteria is crucial for fairness, particularly in high-level roles. MINDtheGEPs interviews highlighted these concerns, especially for women managing caregiving alongside their academic responsibilities. Traditional career standards, often seen as gender-neutral, can disadvantage women, particularly in STEM. The unconditional worker model, prioritizing constant availability and international mobility, can favour men, particularly when women also manage caregiving duties. This dynamic impedes women's career advancement and restricts their access to leadership positions. Gender-neutral processes include using non-sexist language in job ads and ensuring fair assessments.

### Recommendations for how to revise and diversify selection criteria

- Reevaluating career advancement criteria to prevent unintentional biases.
- Recognizing potential gender disadvantages associated with traditional career advancement models.
- Expanding criteria to include personal characteristics often undervalued in formal evaluations.
- Addressing biases related to factors like international mobility.
- Learning from examples of successful revisions to selection criteria, such as those at Mondragon Unibertsitatea.
- Promoting gender-neutral selection processes through inclusive job design and transparent practices.
- By implementing these guidelines, organizations can foster more equitable and inclusive environments, ensuring fair opportunities for all candidates.

## Promote the visibility of successful women

Inspiring women to pursue positions of responsibility is crucial. One effective strategy is showcasing the achievements of successful women across diverse professional domains, offering inspiration and encouragement. By highlighting diverse examples of successful women, organisations can foster a culture that encourages women to aspire to leadership roles. To facilitate access to these role models, we enclose to these recommendations a list of associations and resources where individuals can find expertise and exemplary women in different fields, providing valuable insights and inspiration for women seeking leadership positions.

### AtGender

ATGENDER, The European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation, is an association for academics, practitioners, activists and institutions studying Women's, Gender, Transgender, Sexuality, and Queer studies, feminist research, women's sexual and LGBTQI rights, equality, and diversity.

### European Women Rectors Association (EWORA)

EWORA is an international non-profit association established in Brussels to promote the role of women in leadership positions and advocate for gender equality in higher education and research at European and international level.

### The European Women's Association (EWA)

EWA is a global platform that empowers female founders by establishing a strong and safe foundation for women-led projects and initiatives.

### Business and Professional Women Europe (BPW Europe)

BPW has grown to an international network of 25.000 members in more than 107 countries supporting equal opportunities and status for women in the economic, civil and political life.

### Women in Manufacturing (WiM)

WiM has grown to be the only US and global trade association dedicated to providing year-round support to women who have chosen a career in manufacturing.

# Taking a holistic approach

To achieve gender equality in leadership and decision-making, consider a holistic approach rather than focusing on specific sections. Implementing a strategic plan that utilises multiple tools simultaneously, such as meetings, analyses, awareness measures, and recruitment efforts, can accelerate progress towards objectives.

While the holistic approach may be aggressive and not all organizations may be prepared for such extensive changes, it can be one of the quickest ways to achieve results. MINDtheGEPs partners are adopting this approach in their gender equality plans, following the example set by Šiauliai University in 2014.

- **Prepare for the unexpected**

You may be confronted with teaching & research routines that may put some obstacles in the process. In addition, decision-making on the senior management level is not always as democratic as that of smaller teams. Be ready to cope with structural and leadership changes.

- **Be helpful, not obstructive**

All interventions should be consistent with the academic life cycle, referring to national law and local regulations and policies.

- **Explore the culture of your organisation**

For example, staff working in STEM fields have their own culture with its own characteristics. STEM professionals and disciplines usually rely on numbers, data and direct outcomes. They might not be savvy in the social sciences which can make it challenging to grasp issues of gender sensitivity and equality. Capacity-building, competence-building, or awareness-raising activities should follow an outcome-based approach. Traditional training is not always effective. Explore non-traditional training forms.

- **Knowledge is key**

Keep in mind that academics and professionals, as well as middle and top management may not be gender sensitive. Thus, efforts to raise their awareness and build competencies need to be made. The more people in an organisation that are gender-sensitive, the easier it will be for them to move towards structural change.



**MINDtheGEPs**  
gender equality in research

© MINDtheGEPs 2023.  
This brief was published under a  
Creative Commons 4.0 Attributions  
International license.

## Reference

Antequera, Gema., & Lomba, Adrian. (2024). [D5.1 - Guidelines on planned actions to empower women in decision-making processes](#). Zenodo. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10579143



MINDtheGEPs (Modifying Institutions by Developing Gender Equality Plans) has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no 101006543. The views and opinions expressed in this brief are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.