

Empowering women in research careers

Training early career researchers to promote gender equality

While women are increasingly pursuing research careers, they continue to face challenges in advancing to senior positions in research organisations. MINDtheGEPs offers specialised training programmes tailored for early-career researchers to address these challenges.

Successful organisational change towards gender equality requires action on multiple organisational levels. Our training initiatives aim to empower early-career researchers in partner organisations both in terms of skills development and to help them contribute to a culture of gender equality within their organisations. We emphasise the importance of bottom-up approaches in driving organisational change, encouraging staff to become agents of change within their departments.

Pursuing a fulfilling career path does not just depend on one's individual traits and skills. Working conditions frequently favour certain lifestyles or family models and the leaky pipeline is a real problem in research performing organisations, academic as well as non-academic. To reduce the impact of these factors on women's careers, we present five steps to empower women in their careers through training.

MINDtheGEPs' training philosophy emphasises evidence-based, continuous, and long-term initiatives that address unconscious gender biases throughout organisations. Our training programmes for junior staff are designed to be accessible and inclusive, ensuring that all employees have the opportunity to contribute to gender equality efforts within their institutions.

Training prepared according to this outline can especially help PhD students, post-docs and temporary assistant professors in academia or to women at the beginning or in the middle of a career in non-academic research performing organisations. The training can also be addressed to permanent assistant professors and associate

professors in academia or women in middle rank positions in private research performing organisations in order to reduce the glass ceiling phenomenon.



The European Commission mandates training activities on gender equality in Horizon Europe's eligibility criteria for gender equality plans. Our guidelines align with these requirements, providing support to trainers and academics in promoting gender-balanced solutions across academia.

Cite as: Krzemińska, Katarzyna., Migalska, Alexandra., Sekuła, Paulina., Stoecker, Ewa. (2024) Empowering women in research careers. Training early career researchers to promote gender equality. Zenodo. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11032882

Step 1) Needs analysis

1. **Collect existing data** on the intersections of gender inequalities in your institution and make informed choice of the particular groups that should be trained.
2. **Assess needs at individual level** and recognise the intended participants' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards gender issues as well as their disempowerment risk (e.g. barriers and difficulties they experience in their academic careers). Make sure that you ask about the needs in all three areas (supporting skills development, deconstructing unconscious biases, becoming a leader).
3. **Assess needs at institutional level** – base your knowledge on data concerning gender inequalities in your institution (e.g. databases, reports and studies prepared during the implementation of gender equality projects, your institution's GEP etc.)

Step 2) Prepare the training

When preparing training for your organisation, it is important to consider the specific needs mapped out in the needs analysis. MINDtheGEPs training is composed of three modules: supporting skills development, deconstructing unconscious gender biases, and becoming a leader.

The recommendations below can help ensure that the training prepared upholds a high standard.

1. **Choose adequate methodology** that takes into account the institutional context and the assessment of participants' needs.
Different techniques could include lotus blossom, storyboards, cultural web exercises (e.g. ACT Co-Creation Toolkit 2021; National Women's Council of Ireland, 2014; [SUPERA Webinar on Unconscious bias](#), [SUPERA Webpage on Tools and Techniques](#)).
2. **Prepare high quality content** and materials. Please make sure that you include all module topics in the workshop.
3. **Choose a suitable expert trainer**, for example a professional EDI/DEI trainer. It is imperative that the style, values, and beliefs of the trainer from a gender equality perspective are aligned with the goals of your organisation.

Step 3) Promotion & recruitment

Trainings related to gender equality are not always very well attended. A well-planned promotion and recruitment plan is necessary.

- 1. Ensure leadership commitment:**
Commitment from key stakeholders can help ensure attendance. It is advisable to get buy-in for the need for this training from the start. There needs to be understanding and support from top-management. You may also want to require senior, middle and line managers to encourage staff to attend the training, and hold pre-workshop discussion with line managers to ensure they're aware of the training and the benefits entails, and ensure training is supported by a career development/research office and HR department. Expand the organisation's transformational agent network by involving different actors and departments.
- 2. Communicate with key stakeholders:**
This involves actions such as sharing Expressions of Interest on websites and email networks, using specific branding for the gender equality training. This can be used to promote the training on various posters, documents and make key agents aware of its existence within your organisation. Also include training information on HR communications and post-recruitment documentation.
- 3. Consider obligatory training:** For example, gender equality training can be made mandatory for new employees.
- 4. Engage men as equity allies:** Ensure male participants are targeted in the training. Using men as agents of change is critical to advancing gender equality, however, discussions about privilege is advised.

Step 4) Topics to cover during the training

- 1. Supporting skills development:** Effective, consistent and assertive communication and effective ability of publishing scientific contributions and attaining research funding, decision making, recognition of the situations violating personal boundaries, discrimination and violence, reacting assertively and based on the institutionally and legally available to those situations.
Examples of workshops could include 'How to write a research paper', 'Conference presentations skills training', 'Effective communication';
- 2. Deconstructing unconscious gender biases:** By for example providing an overview of inequality and unconscious bias, examining individual biases in groups and how to adjust them, exploring the potential negative implications of not addressing unconscious bias, providing examples how individuals can address unconscious gender bias in decision making.
Provide a reading list, videos/podcast to explore the topic further.
- 3. Becoming a leader:** The following topics could be included to assist in career progression: information on internal and external leadership programmes directed at women, CV development, project management, on successful female "different" leaders (role models: women being excellent leaders without complying with dominant culture and practices), barriers to change and how to overcome them.
Deconstruct the association between maleness and leadership and provide information on effective leadership behaviours and ways for women to increase self-confidence as a leader.

Step 5) Evaluate the training

Remember to collect feedback from both trainers and trainees after the training. For the best results, we advise that you use...

- 1. Prepare a standardised course evaluation** (1-2 questions) to gauge the participants' perceptions of the course's effectiveness in addressing gender-related issues and promoting gender equality. This ensures that feedback on gender sensitivity training is systematically collected and can be used to improve future iterations of the course.
- 2. Organise a follow-up meeting** (for example a networking event, lean in circles, or Zoom calls) with participants to provide continuous support, reinforcement and networking opportunities related to the skills covered in the training. This can help participants stay engaged, deepen their understanding, and apply what they have learned.

MINDtheGEPs' holistic approach to training

There are different strategies for preparing training for organisational change processes.

Bottom-up approaches start from the grassroots of the organisations and move up the management ladder. Top-down approaches target management first and trickles down. Different organisations have different needs. In the case of large and highly hierarchical organisations, like many universities, the top-down option is often more appropriate, as it legitimises the practices and values that the training brings.

Different groups in an organisation have different needs and experiences. Training programmes cannot be static and duplicated across groups.

Instead, a holistic approach is required – developing a universal training programme that can be modified for different target audiences to ensure that the training responds to their needs and relates to their experiences.

A final important aspect is the constant availability of training. The goal is not to check a box by training the whole organisation at once. Instead, training should be repeated periodically or be made available on a continuous basis, so that new people in the organisation, or people who are promoted or change positions, can benefit from it when they can and from a perspective that suits their current perspective.

References

Migalska, Alexandra., Sekuła, Paulina., Stoecker, Ewa., Ní Fhlatharta, Aiofe., & Macmahon, Helena. (2024). [D4.1 – Guidelines on planned actions for recruitment and retention](#). Zenodo. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10491838



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 policy brief are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.