

Gender awareness-raising



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What is gender awareness raising?

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Awareness raising is a process which helps to facilitate the exchange of ideas, improve mutual understanding and develop competencies and skills necessary for societal change [1]. Gender awareness raising means providing reliable and accessible information to build a better understanding of gender equality as a core value of democratic societies. As a gender-mainstreaming method, gender awareness raising is crucial for integrating a gender perspective into policies, programmes, projects and services that respond to the different needs of women and men.

Definition and purpose

Gender awareness raising aims to promote and encourage a general understanding of gender-related challenges, for instance, violence against women and the gender pay gap. It also aims to show how values and norms influence our reality, reinforce stereotypes and support the structures that produce inequalities [2].

Gender awareness raising plays an important role in informing women and men about gender equality, the benefits of a more gender-equal society and the consequences of gender inequality. For example, raising awareness about the proven economic benefits of advancing gender equality, such as the strong, positive impact on gross domestic product (GDP) and higher levels of employment [3], and about the profound negative impact of gender inequalities, for instance, the fact that women are at a higher risk of poverty because of lower employment prospects [4].

Gender awareness raising intends to change attitudes, behaviours and beliefs that reinforce inequalities between women and men. It is therefore crucial to develop awareness-raising methods that generate a favourable space for debate, promote political interest and encourage mobilisation [5]. In this way, they contribute to gaining broad support and political will for implementing gender mainstreaming and gender equality policies.

Gender awareness raising goes hand in hand with gender equality training as a way to transmit the necessary information and knowledge to take action. This is especially true for the actors involved in policy processes, as it enables them to create interventions that address women's and men's priorities and needs [6] (Read more on EIGE's [Gender Equality Training toolkit](#)).

The purpose of gender awareness raising is threefold:

- to provide basic facts, evidence and arguments on various topics relating to gender equality
- to increase awareness and knowledge about gender (in)equality;
- to foster communication and information exchange so as to improve mutual understanding and learning about gender (in)equality;
- to mobilise communities and society as a whole to bring about the necessary changes in attitudes, behaviours and beliefs about gender equality.

Providing information and raising awareness about gender equality does not, however, automatically lead to social change [9]. Gender awareness-raising initiatives may be met with obstacles and resistance that need to be carefully considered and overcome.

Read more about obstacles and resistance to gender equality

When dealing with resistance, it must be borne in mind that resistance is part of any change process. Resistance can be used to promote change, and there are ways of dealing with it. Sometimes signs of resistance are not necessarily a reaction to the specific topic of gender equality or gender mainstreaming but they can be a reaction to change in general.

In order to overcome resistance, it is important to deal with it by inviting actors to an open dialogue and giving them an opportunity to articulate their concerns and objections. In such a dialogue, it is vital to focus on a common goal as well as on the benefits for everyone. Highlighting facts and figures and using scientific studies to back up arguments can also help to prevent the use of unsubstantiated arguments in debates.

[EIGE's toolkit on institutional transformation](#) provides comprehensive resources, strategies and examples of [how to deal with resistance](#) to gender equality at individual, organisational and discursive levels.

How does gender awareness raising work?

Gender awareness raising can be a part of internal awareness-raising processes in an organisation or institution and/ or it can be a part of planned external activities directed to the general public or a targeted group.

As a gender-mainstreaming method, raising awareness of gender equality can be considered to be a specific activity to be implemented within policies, programmes or projects. To be effective, the process of awareness raising must identify and meet the needs and interests of the actors involved [10]. This can be achieved by paying attention to the following key issues [11].

Who is the target group?

Before starting any gender awareness-raising initiatives, the socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. sex, age, ethnicity, level of education and any other relevant characteristics) of the target group should be considered in order to develop tailored awareness-raising initiatives. In addition, opinion leaders can also be selected as a sub-segment of the target audience because, as influential members of a group, they can promote societal change.

What is the content of the message?

The message communicated and the content of awareness-raising activities should be designed and framed around the specific gender equality topics under consideration. The way the message is conveyed and framed can influence how it is perceived and the overall effect it has. Framing factors include the choice of words and imagery, using emotions or facts and rational arguments, and presenting the consequences of (in)action as losses or gains. Importantly, the content of the message should be credible. It should communicate information that is accurate and is perceived as accurate, based on data with an acknowledgement of the source.

Read more about attitudes towards gender equality

Gender inequalities are the result of a complex web of socially constructed roles and norms that are culturally and historically entrenched in societies. Attitudes towards gender equality, the roles of women and men and gender stereotypes involve feelings, beliefs and behaviours that are formed, nurtured and perpetuated by society, family, institutions, education and religion, among other factors. These attitudes are strongly influenced by social norms that form the basis of the perception of what is right or wrong and the way men and women relate to each other at home and in society [7].

Positive changes in attitudes towards gender equality require multidimensional and interlinked interventions. Hence, gender awareness-raising initiatives should be as targeted and as tailored as possible. As an illustration, raising awareness of the different forms of violence against women and how unequal gender relations perpetuate gender-based violence is an important element for prevention [8]. To see examples of successful, specifically targeted and tailored campaigns aimed at raising awareness to end violence against women, visit the [European Women's Lobby website](#).

Which gender awareness-raising measures should be used?

The type of awareness-raising measures selected will depend on the context and the identified aims in terms of policy, programme or project. An integrated communication programme, which combines different channels, is advisable to reinforce the message. This may include [12]:

communication initiatives that aim to widely disseminate key messages, involving large-scale media such as television, newspapers, radio and websites;

public events (e.g. concerts, information booths at festivals, etc.) to convey the message to a specific target group, such as young people;

social media and social networks, which offer the possibility of interactivity and the potential for the viral dissemination of the message online;

community-based initiatives in a local context to mobilise communities, empower women and promote community dialogue on gender equality, for example, through: public meetings, presentations, workshops, informal social events using interpersonal and participatory approaches;

static and travelling exhibitions and displays;

printed materials – for example brochures, billboards, cartoons, comics, pamphlets, posters, resource books and audio-visual resources;

political advocacy and lobbying.

EIGE's collection of good practices includes [an example of an integrated communication programme](#) which aimed to challenge traditional stereotypes, reduce the care gap and promote men's active role in the family.

It is also important to develop specific initiatives targeting men and boys in recognition of the need to understand their role in achieving gender equality and to involve them in gender-equality efforts.

Read more about initiatives involving men and boys

An example of a gender awareness-raising initiative targeting men and boys is the [White Ribbon Campaign](#) – a global movement of men and boys formed in 1991 working to end male violence against women and girls. Active in over 60 countries, the campaign aims to raise awareness about the prevalence of male violence against women and promote new values on masculinity and relationships between men and women [13].

Another example of awareness-raising measures specifically addressing men is a national awareness-raising campaign launched in Poland in 2012, [Etat Tata. Lubię to! \(Full-time dad – I like it!\)](#). The main theme was to encourage fatherhood and active fathering through a campaign aimed at encouraging men to participate in childcare. The campaign was evaluated by researchers at the University of Warsaw and showed some changes in attitudes among respondents with regard to fathers' and mothers' roles in childcare and child raising, and the division of housework and childcare between parents.

The importance of using gender-sensitive language

Language plays an important role in how women's and men's positions in society are perceived and interpreted, which in turn influences the attitudes towards women and men. Certain words or use of the masculine form as the generic one (common in most languages) can overshadow women in the law, contribute to stereotypes (for instance, in professions), and make women's roles and needs invisible, among other things. In this way, language contributes to, produces and reproduces sexist and biased thoughts, attitudes and behaviours [14].

While gender-neutral language is not gender-specific and makes no reference to women and men, gender-sensitive language is gender equality made manifest through language. In practice, using gender-sensitive language means:

- avoiding exclusionary terms and nouns that appear to refer only to men, for instance, 'chairman', 'mankind', 'businessman', etc.;
- avoiding gender-specific pronouns to refer to people who may be either female or male (use 'he/she', 'him/ her' or 'they/them' instead of 'he/his') [15];
- avoiding stereotypes, gendered adjectives, patronising and sexist terms and expressions (for instance, referring to women as 'bossy', or 'the weaker sex') and references to women's marital status and titles.

In line with these guidelines, in 2009 the European Parliament adopted a series of recommendations on gender-neutral language to be used in parliamentary documents, which are intended to reflect two particular features of the European Parliament's work: its multilingual working environment and its role as a European Union legislator [16].

With the aim of fostering a common understanding of gender equality terms across the EU and promoting gender-fair and inclusive language to improve equality between women and men, EIGE has developed a [Gender Equality Glossary and Thesaurus](#), a specialised terminology tool focusing on the area of gender equality.

In 2019, EIGE will also release a toolkit on gender-sensitive language.

Pictures, graphics, video and audio materials are also powerful communication tools to influence perceptions, attitudes and social change. The principles of gender-sensitive language for written and oral communications must also be applied to audio and visual materials, i.e. videos, photographs and infographics [17].

These are key principles for gender-sensitive communication [18]:

Ensuring that women and men are represented. Both women and men should be visible and treated equally in media products and messages. It is important to ensure that the voices of both women and men are included in press releases, news stories, broadcasts and other communications that are used by the media to inform the public and raise awareness. When preparing communication materials it is important to plan how women's and men's voices can be captured and ensure that women are also visually presented as equals in all areas of life.

Challenging gender stereotypes. Gender-sensitive communications can contribute to challenging gender stereotypes through language and images. It is important to avoid using words and expressions that reinforce gender stereotypes as well as images that portray them and/or exert violence. It is important to choose images that portray a balanced representation of both genders and to ensure that they do not discriminate against or demean a person.

Further information

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Endnotes

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Other resources

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