EIGE European Institute for Gender Equality

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Gender balance in leadership and decision making

Main Section   Videos & Webinars   Tools & Resources

Efforts to promote gender balance in leadership and decision-making have been undertaken in numerous countries. However, despite the policies and measures taken, data shows that women remain under-represented in academic and administrative leadership and decision-making positions in universities and research institutions across Europe. For example, according to *She Figures 2021* ⬈ observed that only 14 % of rectors in 46 countries with European University Association ⬈ members were women in 2019.

Improving gender balance in leadership and decision-making is therefore a **key objective for gender equality plans (GEPs)**. Aspects considered in a GEP may include:

how women are represented in decision-making at the top of the organisation, across academic/research departments and administrative functions;
what types of barriers exist to ensuring women are represented in decision-making and leadership positions, including structural, institutional and individual barriers;
what targets could be set to promote gender balance in leadership and decision-making roles across the organisation;
which steps can be taken, and by **whom**, to achieve these targets.

See below for measures to consider in your GEP, additional tips on what to think of and examples from other organisations.

Consider these measures for addressing the issue in your gender equality plan

The EU project 'Female empowerment in science and technology academia' (FESTA) identified specific policies and practices that can be considered to improve organisational processes, procedures and culture, so that more women can take on and stay in leadership and decision-making positions.

Examining and adapting processes and procedures for the selection and appointment of staff on committees and other bodies. This can include auditing the work of committees and decision-making bodies to assess the inclusiveness of their practices and outcomes, reviewing the selection processes of committees and decision-making bodies specifically, and making appointments to committees on a fixed-term basis to ensure that membership changes regularly.

Making committee membership more transparent. Evidence shows that women are more likely to succeed in recruitment and promotion when there is clarity about what is required, when information about the opportunities is freely available and when the criteria used in decision-making are clear and unequivocal. Ensuring that information on members of key committees is publicly available, that minutes are published openly on websites, and that vacancies are published with the conditions for applying and the evaluation criteria can be important to increase gender balance in decision-making. **Ensuring that leadership and decision-making roles are properly recognised in evaluations of work.** This includes in relation to the generation of research funding and outputs.

Providing support to women employees to enable them to achieve leadership and decision-making goals. This can be done through leadership programmes for women or through gender-balanced development programmes, to help enhance their leadership competences and explore individual leadership styles; leadership mentoring programmes; and peer networking opportunities.

Providing all decision-makers and leaders with gender equality training, particularly committee members and chairs. This can be crucial to help mitigate (unconscious) selection biases, but can also contribute to awareness-raising and better understanding of the gender dynamics at play in interactions during meetings.

Ensuring gender balance through the introduction of gender quotas. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines a gender quota as a 'positive measurement instrument … that establishes a defined proportion (percentage) or number of places to be filled by, or allocated to, women and/or men, generally under certain rules or criteria'. Check out the paper by Voorspoels and Bleijenbergh (2019), 'Implementing gender quotas in academia: a practice lens' ⬀ in order to learn the different ways in which gender quotas or targets can be implemented.

Note that increasing the number and share of women in leadership and decision-making positions is a process that **touches upon all aspects in the GEP**, from sex-disaggregated data collection and analysis to identifying issues to gender-sensitive training, organisational practices and the promotion of work−life balance.

Get some tips on what to consider when implementing measures

When developing a GEP, organisations should consider the **different locations for decision-making and their roles and remit**. For example, all organisations covered by the GEP eligibility criterion will have a senior executive team with day-to-day responsibility for decision-making, alongside some form of governing body or comparable arrangement overseeing the organisation's main decisions. In addition, organisations may have a variety of other decision-making locations. For example, universities may have a range of committees relating to quality assurance and research approval, including at departmental levels. Similarly, research funding organisations or public bodies will also have a range of decision-making bodies (e.g. for funding decisions) or advisory groups that should also be considered.

Once you have identified the different locations for formal and informal decision-making, consider the following points on including gender balance and leadership in your GEP.

Achieving gender balance in decision-making requires more than just increased representation. Ensuring that an appropriate number of women are on committees should be accompanied by measures to examine decision-making processes to ensure decisions consider gender issues and women are empowered to take an equal role.
Support from management/leadership is highly important for success. When the top of the organisation explicitly supports gender equality, legitimacy is given to the issue and all can feel safe raising gender matters when decisions need to be taken.
Some measures might need a more gradual implementation. Quotas, for instance, despite their effectiveness, can evoke significant resistance. Try starting with voluntary targets or a cascade model and closely monitor the effects. If such measures do not yield the desired changes, then introduce binding quotas, considering cultural specificities.

However, despite all efforts, women are sometimes **reluctant to apply for decision-making positions**, especially in contexts dominated by men. This can be explained by a variety of factors. The still very masculine image of science, the way informal networks continue to function in selection processes and the fact that the bulk of high-level positions remain occupied by men are just some of the elements that convey the message that there is no place for women at the top.

In order to get more detailed information and guidance on how to promote gender balance in leadership and decision-making, check out the resources provided in the **tab 'Tools and resources'**.
Get inspired by what other organisations have implemented
Here are some **examples of measures** implemented in other organisations that were collected during the gender equality in academia and research (GEAR) tool update in 2021 (note that they will open in a new window):

> **ensuring the implementation of the provisions laid down in law No 26/2019**, University of Coimbra, Portugal,
> **Equality Committee**, Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania,
> **spokesperson budget**, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Germany,
> **'Taking a reflexive approach to gender equality for institutional transformation' (TARGET) project**, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), Greece.

You can find further inspirational examples in the following sources.

EIGE provides a section on good practices for various relevant topics;
the EU-funded project 'Promoting gender balance and inclusion in research, innovation and training' (PLOTINA) provides a library of actions ⧉, focusing on issues such as career progression and work–life balance, but also the integration of sex and gender in teaching curricula;
the EU-funded project 'Gender equality actions in research institutions to transform gender roles' (GEARING ROLES) provides a list of best-practice examples ⧉ across Europe, with a focus specifically on leadership and decision-making;
these sustainable measures were already mentioned in the first version of the GEAR tool and are still in place.

If you want to learn more about how you can adjust these measures for your own purposes and how to implement them through a GEP, read the step-by-step guide for research organisations, universities and public bodies, or the step-by-step guide for research funding organisations.