



3. Gender-sensitive HR policies and practices

Do your HR policies make the work environment and practices truly inclusive so that all genders can thrive and progress? Are your professional benefits, work, and leave arrangements conducive to retaining talent with different life and personal situations? And most importantly, what are you doing to create a workplace where everyone feels valued and empowered, regardless of gender?

Note: for specific guidance on a policy against sexual harassment on the workplace, see [resource #3.1](#).



What do we mean by gender-sensitive HR policies and practices?

Gender-sensitive HR policies and practices refer to guidelines and processes implemented within organizations to ensure equal treatment, opportunities, and support for individuals of all genders. They cover a wide range of areas, including compensation, benefits, leave and work arrangements, and workplace culture. These practices aim to create a work environment where everyone feels valued, respected, treated fairly, and included, regardless of their gender identity or expression.

Why do gender-insensitive HR policies and practices happen?

Gender insensitive HR policies and more generally work culture often arise due to a combination of factors. For instance, many organizations have been and still are men-dominated, with policies and practices reflecting men's needs and preferences. The lack of formalized HR guidelines prevalent in many start-ups also leads to inconsistent practices and decisions, which tend to be bias-rich and difficult to question. Leadership teams lacking diversity may not fully understand or prioritize the different circumstances and needs of all employees, who may have different circumstances at work and at home. Finally, resistance to changing established practices, coupled with inadequate training and awareness of diversity, equity, and inclusion, further perpetuates gender insensitivity.

Why are gender-sensitive HR policies and practices important?

Gender-sensitive HR policies and practices, e.g. remuneration, benefits, leave, work arrangements, and overall company culture yield multifaceted benefits for businesses. They play a crucial role in managing employees' well-being and engagement, outlining what is valued (or "not welcome") in the company culture. They can also address issues such as gender-based micro-aggressions [1] which can adversely affect confidence and performance. Lastly, they can also boost employee retention and productivity. Equally important are policies benefitting parents. For instance, when Google increased its paid maternity leave program from 12 to 18 weeks, the rate of women's turnover after maternity leave was reduced by 50% [2]. Moreover, more than 80% of companies that offer paid family leave reported a positive impact on employee morale, and more than 70% reported an increase in employee productivity [3]. Once the parents are back from leave, the company should further assist them with some kind of childcare benefits, e.g. subsidizing daycare. Research shows that, for every USD1 spent on childcare benefits, employers see up to USD4.25 return through reduced absenteeism, less lateness, and lower turnover rates [4]. Perks and benefits can also be selected with a view to catering to a broader range of needs and preferences (e.g. team retreats, sabbatical leave, etc.). Finally, ensuring that gender-bias training is part of every team member's onboarding is vital in combating stereotypes and biases, and in promoting respect and understanding among colleagues.

How does one ensure that HR policies and practices are gender-sensitive?

One of the easiest ways to improve one's HR policies and practices is often to review them collaboratively, and if not done already, formalize them further in a participatory and transparent fashion, to ensure that different needs and preferences are voiced and taken into account. More specific steps would entail:

[1] <https://phys.org/news/2019-03-women-percent-hiring-men.html>

[2] <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.90.4.715>

[3] https://www.eu-libra.eu/sites/default/files/article-files/libra_recruitment_guidelines_second_edition_0.pdf

[4] https://buscompress.com/uploads/3/4/9/8/34980536/riber_sk14-026_402-410_.pdf

1. **Identify pain points:** Identify key pain points, or even better, do a 360° assessment of your current practices. Consider in particular policies related to:
 - Enforcing equal pay to eliminate gender wage gaps: Enforcing equal pay practices is a necessary step, but it does not address potential biases in performance evaluations or promotions that contribute to the wage gap. To achieve true wage equity, companies need to implement regular pay audits, standardize promotion criteria, and communicate salary scale transparently.
 - Monetary and non-monetary benefits: While many companies offer various perks and benefits, it may be that not everyone uses or values them equally. For instance, these benefits may not appeal equally to all genders, and eligibility requirements could unintentionally exclude some. To ensure fairness, companies should analyse benefit utilization data by gender and consider offering more and more flexible options that cater to different needs and preferences.
 - Sick leave and other leave policies, including parental leave policies: These policies typically do not provide sufficient protection for parents (and in particular the habitual caretaker in a family), especially during child (or elderly relatives') illnesses, unexpected school closures, or long school holidays. To fix this, companies should find ways to evolve their leave policies and offer more flexibility, and possibly financial protection that extends beyond legal requirements, ensuring equitable support for all staff, and in particular caregivers.
 - Flexible work arrangements accommodating diverse caregiving responsibilities: Policies usually do not sufficiently cover the diverse needs of caregivers, such as flexible working hours or remote work options, making it challenging for them to manage their duties effectively. To address this, companies can seek which arrangements would truly alleviate the burden of concerned team members, and help them manage all of their responsibilities more effectively.
 - Ensuring occupational safety measures in every circumstance: One-size-fits-all safety policies often miss the mark because men and women may have different physical strength, risk perception, or experience harassment differently. Even in seemingly low-risk environments, well-lit areas and secure transportation options at night can make a big difference for everyone's safety and well-being.
 - Driving a work culture where everyone feels respected and comfortable: Having an effective policy against sexual harassment is a must for all organizations (see [resource #3.1 – Policy against sexual harassment on the workplace](#)). However, while crucial, anti-harassment policies often address only the tip of the iceberg. Company culture is built on a foundation of subtle interactions and norms. To foster true belonging, consider all aspects of company culture, from how celebrations are organized to whether after-work drinks are mandatory or optional. This can be achieved through surveys and focus groups to identify areas where employees from different genders might feel excluded or uncomfortable.
2. **Gather team's inputs collaboratively and transparently:** Collect employees' perspectives, needs, and expectations through discussions, surveys, and workshops. Engage in open dialogue to ensure policies resonate with the workforce's diverse needs and aspirations. This feedback will inform the development and refinement of gender-balanced HR policies that reflect the organization's values and priorities. It is strongly recommended to also seek input from a qualified legal professional to ensure the policies are compliant with all relevant national and local laws.
3. **Formalize policies:** Once the content has been outlined with the team, formalize these agreements into written documents. Ensure that each policy clearly outlines its objectives,

procedures, and expectations to provide clarity and consistency for all employees. Make sure the policies are accessible to all employees, presented thoroughly to new hires, and are free from gender-specific language or biases.

4. **Create processes and assign responsibilities:** Develop processes for implementing and enforcing the policies effectively. Assign specific responsibilities to HR personnel and managers to oversee the implementation process and ensure adherence to the policies.
5. **Monitor and measure progress:** Implement metrics and tracking mechanisms to monitor the effectiveness of gender-inclusive HR policies. Regularly review and update the policies as needed to reflect changes in laws, regulations, or organizational needs. Establish mechanisms for feedback and continuous monitoring to address any challenges or issues that may arise in the implementation process.

In addition, as mentioned above, ensuring that every team member, starting at the onboarding week, is trained on gender topics, and is made more aware of gender biases, helps drive a culture that fosters diversity, inclusion, and respect. Our free online course is available [here](#), but if one prefers to develop content in-house, these are some practical guidelines to design effective gender-related training:

- Less theory and more applied learning, specific to your organization, delivered bite-sized. Tangibly demonstrates what needs to be fixed, how, and what are the benefits of it, through real-world examples, testimonies, and peer-to-peer learning
- Confronts prejudice through counter-stereotypical information and self-reflection, as well as work on identifying and addressing gender (unconscious) biases
- Ensures effective post-training implementation, including ongoing support, until the organization starts reaping the benefits of the changes made and internalizes the necessity of it
- Continuously evaluate the effectiveness of training through surveys and engagement metrics.

How to measure progress and success?

Through our own, LeFil's [research](#), we identified a number of metrics that can be improved through gender-focused initiatives, and which are meaningful to track as you progress with the implementation of your efforts. For some of these metrics, we provide a benchmark value, which is the average that close to 100 ventures like yours recorded after having worked on this topic. These metrics are:

Metric	Benchmark
Proportion of men/ women in staff	42% women
Staff satisfaction	82%
Gender pay gap ratio	N/A
Proportion of staff rating work-life balance as good	N/A
Staff productivity	59%

Case studies



Designing gender-inclusive workplace policies by Cacao Verapaz

Cacao Verapaz managed to increase its employees' satisfaction and productivity at work by developing and rolling out an HR policy that provides inclusive and consistent work-related benefits to its employees.

Cacao Verapaz is a specialty cacao beans exporter based in Guatemala. It works directly with smallholder farmers, offering them technical assistance and above-market prices, contributing to improving their productivity and income. The venture then exports the cacao production to the USA, Europe and Australia.

Cacao Verapaz's team took part in our Gender Mainstreaming Workshop and realized that the company did not have a formal HR policy on work-related benefits and policies (e.g., accident-related leave, maternity/parental leave, flexible and home-based work, temporary employment, caretaking duty-related leave, etc.), making it sometimes difficult to make fair and consistent decisions in this regard. This lack of clarity was disproportionately affecting women team members, as the dual home and work burden befalling on women typically requires gender-smart HR policy adjustments. An important aspect also revolved around the options/ policy for apprenticeship and training. Here again, there were just a few training opportunities for women team members that could help them undertake bigger responsibilities and therefore access progression chances within the company. The objective for the leadership was not only to make the company more gender inclusive, but also to increase its employees' satisfaction and productivity. To do so, Cacao Verapaz:

- collaboratively put together a list of topics and work-related practices it wanted to improve upon, and analysed what required changes or further investments
- formalized and rolled out the prioritized policy changes; this included developing the corresponding protocols which outline the steps required to follow said policy (e.g. steps required to implement the zero-tolerance policy for gender-based harassment, when/if such cases arise)
- assigned responsibilities to ensure that these policies get implemented and respected
- identified relevant trainings to offer to its (women) employees, made a training plan and blocked a dedicated budget for it.

Cacao Verapaz now holds an employee manual covering all the new HR policies, such as zero tolerance for gender-based violence and harassment, no child labour, internal conduct, maternity leave, etc. Additionally, it gave its team access to virtual trainings that support their professional growth. With these changes, Cacao Verapaz' productivity (measured as the quantity of targeted activities finalized by each employee every trimester) increased from 61% (in Q1 2023, when they started working on these changes) to 83% (in Q3 2023, after the changes were implemented). The team's extensive involvement in these initiatives also resulted in an increased participation in meetings by all employees, especially women, whose "share of voice" was reportedly very low at the onset. And while staff satisfaction was not

being tracked prior to this initiative, it is now reported at 75%. Cacao Verapaz is committed to continue promoting and reinforcing these policies, increase employee satisfaction further, and ultimately it aims at helping its supplying cacao producers adopt similar gender-balanced employment practices.