

Gender-SMART Brief Issue 3: Working on gender⁺-sensitive governance by self-assessment and co-creation workshops addressing representation, internal communications and decision-making

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Introduction

This Gender-SMART brief reports on the outcomes and recommendations resulting from three Gender+ SMART workshops with governing bodies of Wageningen University & Research [WUR]. These workshops were held to advance the 5th dimension of the Gender Equality Plan '[Towards a Gender+ SMART WUR](#)' which gave direction for Gender-SMART initiatives from August 2020 up to December 2022.

The 5th dimension focuses on reshaping governance, leadership and decision-making, to ultimately foster gender+-sensitive, democratic and participatory leadership in governance and decision-making at WUR as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Four outcomes of WUR Dimension 5: Gender+-sensitive governance, leadership, and decision-making.

Outcome 1. Improved gender+ regulations in recruitment & selection in governing bodies to reach gender+ -balanced representation.	Outcome 2. Increased use of gender+-sensitive approaches in communication.
Outcome 3. Increased awareness and recognition of gender+-sensitive, democratic and participatory leadership styles.	Outcome 4. Strengthened active engagement of WUR governing bodies in the wide range of gender+ policies.

In 2022 a pilot was designed and three types of governing bodies were invited and agreed to engage: the WUR Council, Board of Education and Wageningen Graduate Schools. [WUR Council](#) is the informal consultation in which the Student Staff Council [SSC]¹ and Central Works Council [COR]² meet. The WUR Council does not have legal participation rights on its own, the formal rights lie with the SSC and COR. [The Board of Education](#) [BoE] functions as a single board for all degree programs at WUR and is responsible for the content, quality, and innovation of the Bachelor's and Master's programs at WUR. The BoE also advises the Executive Board of WUR on specific educational matters.³ [Wageningen Graduate Schools](#) [WGS] forms a cooperation body of the six Graduate Schools of WUR, which are responsible for academic research and PhD programs. Members of WGS convene on a regular basis to align strategies on the quality of research and PhD-education. The Executive Board will hear WGS in relevant

¹ The SSC consists of employees of Wageningen University who are delegated by the Central Works Council, supplemented by two directly elected employees of Wageningen University, two directly elected PhD candidates and at least six students who are delegated by the SC. Students and staff have an equal number of votes in the SSC.

² In the Central Works Council (COR), members hold seats delegated by and from among the members of the (Joint) Works Councils of the 5 Sciences Groups, WFSR, Corporate Staff and Facilities & Services.

³ The BoE consists of eight members: four professors and four students. The Executive Board appoints the members of the BoE. The term for student members is one year and the term for professors is two years. Members can be reappointed twice. The Dean of Education serves as the chair of the BoE, without actually being a member of it.

policy issues that concern the education of PhD candidates and the research performed by the Graduate Schools.⁴

Gender⁺-sensitive governance is key to positive transformations
in agriculture and food systems and societies worldwide.

Workshops

Following an integrative and participatory approach, the workshop is meant as a self-assessment and co-creation session with WUR governing bodies, focusing on their internal communication and organizing structure rather than the content of their tasks and responsibilities. The aim of the workshop was formulated as follows: *“the ability to identify and assess internal recruitment, decision-making and communication practices & patterns in light of gender⁺ equality, both by naming good practices & patterns and to identify and revisit ones to be further improved.”*

Purpose

The purpose of the workshop is threefold:

- To gain more insight in the (potential) gender⁺ bias in the -interrelated- processes of selection and representation, internal communication and decision-making / leadership.
- To enhance addressing gender⁺ bias in these processes.
- To ultimately foster gender⁺-sensitive, democratic and participatory leadership in governance and decision-making at WUR.

Lotus flower exercise

In order to become more gender⁺-sensitive in various organizational aspects of the WUR bodies, a lotus flower exercise is used. This technique allows a group to systematically break down general ideas and concepts into possible solutions or actions. Deriving from outcome 1, 2 and 3 in Figure 1, we distinguished three themes, every theme needed to be worked out in one lotus flower:

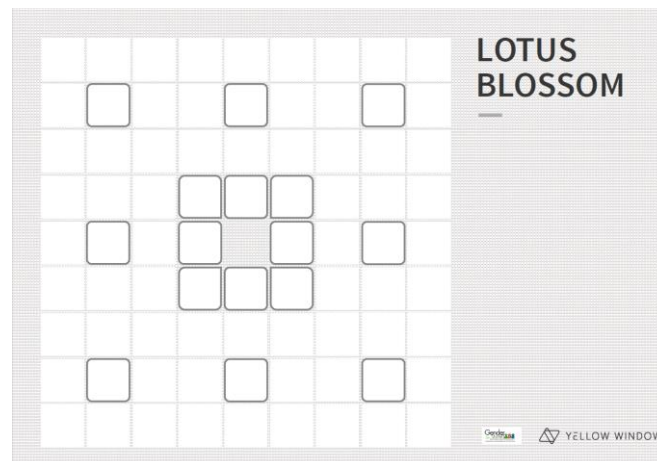
- Gender⁺ (in)balance in selection & representation
- Gender⁺ bias and -sensitivity in decision-making and leadership practices
- Gender⁺ bias and -sensitivity in internal communication

The participants were divided into three groups, taking into consideration an even distribution of work positions, age, and gender. Every group started with one theme, and was asked to write down in the inner boxes procedures and practices the WUR

⁴ WGS consists of the scientific directors of the Graduate Schools and their support staff. The chair of WGS is the Dean of Research.

body follows as relevant for the specific theme. For round 2, every group switched to another theme and was asked to develop for each mentioned procedure or practice of the previous group to discuss what makes these challenging or contributing to gender⁺ sensitivity. Subsequently, every group switched again to a theme they had not discussed yet. In this last round, they were asked to think of recommendations or actions to improve the procedures or practices that came up in previous rounds. Figure 2 shows the diagram used in the workshops.

Figure 2. Lotus flower diagram



The participants were supported by a short introduction (15 min.) on the Gender-SMART goals in general and especially for WP5 that at WUR has been elaborated in Dimension 5. The intro included also a short intro on the gender⁺ aspects of the three themes based on literature which was later shared on an instruction sheet.

Theme 1: Gender⁺ (im)balance in selection & representation

For every theme, we provided possible discussion points to start the conversation. To address potential gender⁺ bias in selection procedures and practices, participants can talk about the acquisition or recruitment of candidates. Subsequently, the way in which these candidates are selected is important: by voting or by representation. Moreover, which informal and formal practices play a role in recruitment processes? The division of formal and occasional tasks also play a role in this theme. Who is seen as credible and are there any internal support systems for development?

Theme 2: Gender⁺ bias in decision-making and leadership practices

For this theme, participants can discuss which leadership styles are used in their organization. Consequently, it can be considered which leadership style is suiting for a gender⁺-sensitive approach. Figure 3 shows examples of leadership styles. In terms of decision-making, participants can ask themselves if there is enough space for everyone to feel acknowledged and take initiatives. And are these initiatives followed through? Moreover, are possible impacts or perspectives of all diverse groups represented in all

decisions? Other possible discussion points are: chairing, setting agenda items, space to speak, inviting, requesting, interruption or ending discussion, proposal arrangements, and minutes.

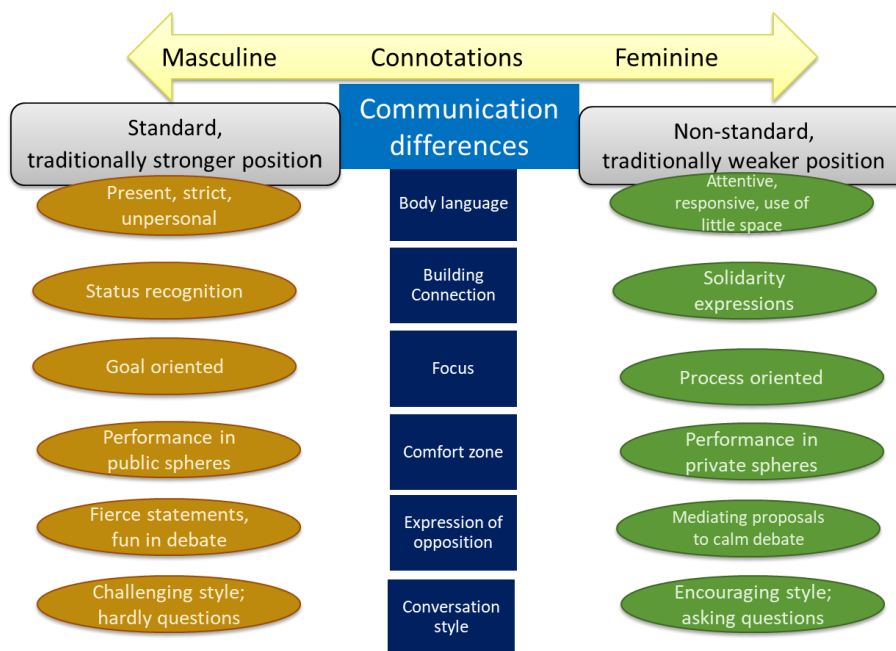
Figure 3. Examples leadership styles



Theme 3: Gender+ bias and gender+ sensitivity in internal communication

For this last theme, participants can discuss internal and in-person communication, bias in interpretation or miscommunication, ways to create understanding, inclusive language, and differences in communication between different work positions. Figure 4 shows an example of communication differences in terms of masculine and feminine connotations.

Figure 4. Communication differences: spectrum between extreme masculine and feminine



Key outcomes

After having held three workshops with WUR Council, the Board of Education and Wageningen Graduate Schools, there are various reoccurring topics per theme. Moreover, embeddedness in the WUR organizational structure stood out as a determinant for being able to be gender⁺ sensitive in procedures and practices.

Theme 1: Selection and Representation

It is noticeable it is noticeable that in all three WUR governing bodies women well represented, sometimes overrepresented. All had predominantly Dutch members. It works as a language barrier to others although English is first language at WUR. Also unwritten rules or informal procedures corresponding Dutch ways of governance, can be a barrier to participate and function comfortably for non-Dutch persons. This is partly also affirmed by student members of Dutch descent, who also see it takes time to feel comfortable, belonging and effectively contributing. They expressed that the study time compensation for their contribution was not enough. In terms of the division of tasks and responsibilities, the chairs of the participating bodies were all male, while support staff is predominantly female. Participants noted that appointment procedures are often informal, this also goes for the election of chairs and new members. Working groups were mostly set up on voluntary basis. Participants indicated that there is a small pool to choose from and a low influx in terms of recruitment. Therefore, most felt they had limited options to select on gender and diversity as they would wish themselves.

Theme 2: Leadership & Decision-making

Within this theme, all groups expressed they work on the basis of consensus. In terms of decision-making, discussions contain informal rules, in which it is not clear whether knowledge or experience is providing authority importantly. Some express that it happens that members who speak the loudest are the first or most heard.

Theme 3: Internal communication

Overall, participants feel that there is a culture of valuing different and diverse opinions. Full agendas though can compromise accurate sharing. Therefore, the procedure to select agenda items was discussed and looked for how to prepare items better or what to leave out of the agenda and discuss otherwise.

Clear embeddedness in WUR organizational structure

What turned out to be an underlying topic was the embeddedness in the WUR organizational structure. This matters in being able to pursue procedures and that are effective and inclusive or gender⁺-sensitive. If the agenda is often overloaded and it is not clear what can be left out, high time pressure in meetings easily conflicts with gathering and weighing of diverse and different opinions. The focus on producing results can then easily win from careful process facilitation. One related point was made

that feedback on advice given was mostly not received. Clarity about the mandate and corresponding tasks and responsibilities was considered supportive to the transparency about the sphere of influence and requirements for their representative structure. This unclarity can get in the way of installing gender⁺ sensitive practices and procedures in representation, leadership, decision-making and internal communication.

Regarding external communication, it was also noted that there is a lack of visibility to external parties. In this area, all did see room for improvement in terms of image and branding which can also contribute to attracting new members from larger pools. They all acknowledge that formal representation regulations do not lead to a diverse selection of candidates without effort. All groups struggle with widening the pool to choose from for regular rotation of members. More so for students who come in and go or spend longer study times abroad or for representatives of WUR minorities who often receive requests to join very often..

Recommendations

Based on the key outcomes of the workshops, we formulated six recommendations to foster gender⁺-sensitive, democratic and participatory leadership in governance and decision-making at WUR. These are considered useful for other organisations as well.

1. Organize annual information sessions open to everyone to inform them about the organizational structure

An annual information session to clarify the mandates, tasks and responsibilities of the various WUR governing bodies, will contribute to expanding the pool of potential candidates for the different WUR bodies beyond 'known' persons. This can be part of an overall campaign to improve the image and branding of governing bodies. In these sessions, other WUR wide aspects can be addressed such as social safety guidelines and reporting mechanisms within WUR can be incorporated as well.

2. Improve the embeddedness of governing bodies in the wider organizational structure

Well-defined organizational embeddedness will contribute to more effective representativity, agenda setting, internal communication and decision-making, and transparency plus feed-back processes. Such embeddedness of a governing body enables to make organizational practices and procedures gender⁺-sensitive.

3. Improve external visibility and communication of governing bodies

Improved external visibility and communication, especially as well through channels and in English that less represented groups follow, can stimulate more persons of the WUR community to get involved in the activities and governance of the various WUR governing bodies.

4. Formulate guidelines and formal procedures for electing chairs

Informal processes of electing chairs, new members or workgroup participants risk overlooking relative outsiders or who are reluctant to show interest. Therefore, it is considered important to discuss the criteria and procedures openly, and together agree upon these, furthermore enabling to normalize reporting of the selection procedure. It became clear from the workshops that new members are often unaware of the informal processes and can be too late to show interest.

5. Find creative ways to increase input beyond selection and election procedures

Implementation of new aspects to safeguard inclusive and gender-sensitive recruitment and selection in the formal procedure can be achieved by creatively reconsidering the (in)formal qualifications and qualities of potential candidates and consequently extend the pool of candidates. This concerns what positions and characteristics in persons is looked for. It can be chosen to articulate diversity to optimize team work, e.g. looking for both introvert and extravert, masculine and feminine ways of operating, gender⁺ competence. Another option is to diversify representation beyond formal decision-making, for instance by inviting others for feed-back in sessions on specific themes. By flexibly rethinking governance, taking part can become more familiar and appealing for a more diverse group of staff and students.

6. Invest in self-assessment and openness regarding inclusive decision-making

The workshops participants were enthusiastic about taking the time to reflect on their internal communication and decision-making processes. Taking time and attention to share and collectively look for change in routines is recommended as well as to repeat a likewise workshop to address these aspects in an organised way regularly.

Useful sources

WUR and also external organizations have worked on sources to foster gender⁺-sensitive, democratic and participatory leadership in governance and decision-making. Below you find some of these sources; please note that this is not exhaustive.

Within WUR:

- [Guidelines for Working in Multicultural Settings](#)
- [Guidelines Inclusive language](#) (Word choice)
- [Language Guideline](#) (ENG/NL)
- [Code of Conduct for Foreign Languages, January 2018](#)

Other interesting sites to consult:

- [Understanding unconscious bias](#) (2015, video clip of UK The Royal Society)
- [Group Decision Making](#) (2018, video clip of The UK Royal Society)
- Gender communication differences in the workplace: [source 1](#), [2](#), [3](#)
- [Short explanation intersectionality](#), [Spin the Wheel of Power & Privilege](#)
- [European Institute for Gender Equality](#) (EIGE)
 - [Gender Equality in Academia and Research](#)
 - [EIGE portal gender in agriculture and rural development](#)
- [Gender Equality Academy](#)
- European Commission, DG for Research and Innovation (2020). [Gendered innovations 2](#): how inclusive analysis contributes to research and innovation : policy review, Publications Office, 2020
- KNAW (2022) [Social Safety in Dutch Academia](#). From Paper to Practice



More on gender⁺ integration in research in agricultural and food sciences by Gender-SMART

- Gender-SMART websites:
 - WUR: <https://www.wur.nl/en/project/Gender-SMART-1.htm>
 - EU: <https://www.gendersmart.eu>



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