



South Asian Regional  
Trade Union Council



# Practical Manual of Writing, Adopting & Implementation of Gender Policy for Unions

Researcher: Radhika Dhingra



# Foreword

The trade union movement has long been a relentless force for social justice and workers' rights. Its foundational principles of solidarity, fairness, and equality remain as vital today as they were over a century ago. Yet, as the world of work evolves, so too must the institutions that champion and represent its workers.

Achieving true equality within unions requires more than commitment in principle; it demands practical tools, shared understanding, and structured action. The challenge of the 21st century is to ensure that the equality unions fight for externally is fully reflected in the inclusivity they practice internally.

Evidence from across the globe consistently shows that gender inequalities persist – in leadership representation, equal pay, and protection from harassment – both in the workplace and within the unions themselves. When unions fail to empower and protect all their members, they weaken their own voice, dilute their bargaining power, and fall short of their core mandate.

Arriving at a crucial moment, this *Practical Manual of Writing, Adopting & Implementation of Gender Policy for Unions* is not a theoretical exercise; it is a roadmap for organizational transformation. It offers unions step-by-step guidance to translate principles into practice, helping leaders, members, and gender focal points turn aspirations for equality into tangible institutional change. By linking national legal frameworks, international labor standards, and field-tested lessons from Nepal, this manual grounds its guidance in both evidence and experience.

What makes this manual particularly valuable is its emphasis on participation and learning. It is designed to equip every union leader, activist, and member with the tools to write, adopt, and implement a robust Gender Policy that goes beyond mere compliance. It demonstrates that effective gender policies are not written in isolation but are co-created through dialogue, reflection, and inclusivity.

The case study from Nepal illustrates how unions can begin this process from within – conducting gender audits, building leadership commitment, and fostering ownership among members at all levels. If enacted, this policy will serve as a definitive commitment to:

- Equal Representation in decision-making.
- A Safe and Inclusive Workplace free from violence and harassment.
- Inclusive Advocacy that addresses the needs of all members.

By embracing the principles and practical steps outlined here, unions can not only correct structural imbalances but also significantly strengthen their democratic practices and their overall effectiveness. The future of a strong labor movement depends on its ability to champion the dignity and potential of every worker, regardless of gender.

As the world of work continues to evolve, unions must lead by example, ensuring that equity and dignity are reflected not only in the demands they make but in the structures they embody. This manual provides both inspiration and instruction for that journey.

I commend the authors, facilitators, and union representatives whose collaboration and vision made this resource possible. May it serve as a living tool for every union seeking to build a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient labor movement – one in which every member, regardless of gender, can participate fully and safely.

And I urge all who read this manual to move beyond reading and toward action. Transform your internal structures, empower your diverse membership, and lead the way in creating the truly just and equitable workplaces we all deserve.

**Laxman Basnet**

General Secretary

*South Asian Regional Trade Union Council (SARTUC)*

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose of the Manual

Trade unions have historically been powerful agents of social justice, advocating for workers' rights and equality. Yet, as evidence shows, gender inequalities persist — in representation, access to opportunities, safety, and decision-making — both in workplaces and within unions themselves (Gender, Diversity and Intersectionality Training Programme, 2023; Draft Gender Policy for a Trade Union in Nepal, 2023).

A gender policy is a critical step toward addressing these structural inequalities, ensuring dignity, fairness, and empowerment for all workers, regardless of their gender identity (Draft Gender Policy for a Trade Union in Nepal, 2023). As highlighted by the organisations, promoting gender equality requires not only adopting formal commitments but also transforming internal structures, leadership practices, and workplace cultures to value the contributions of all.

This manual has been developed as a practical guide for trade union leaders, members, and activists who are committed to advancing gender equality in their unions and workplaces. It draws on national legal frameworks (such as India's Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013 as described in FES India SHW Policy, 2023), international standards (such as ILO Convention 190, reflected in FES HQ Sexual Harassment Policy, 2023), and good practices documented in Nepalese unions (Draft Gender Policy for a Trade Union in Nepal, 2023).

It provides step-by-step guidance on writing, adopting, and implementing a gender policy, with illustrative examples, lessons learned, and tools for monitoring progress.

## 1.2 Who is this for?

This manual is designed for:

- **Union leadership and decision-makers**, to help craft and institutionalize gender-responsive policies.
- **Union members and activists**, who wish to advocate for gender equality within their unions.
- **Gender focal points and committees**, responsible for implementing gender-related initiatives.
- Any stakeholder committed to creating safe, inclusive, and equitable workplaces through union action.

## 1.3 How to Use this Manual

This manual is organized into clear sections that take you through the entire process of creating and operationalizing a gender policy:

- Understanding why a gender policy is important, and the value it brings to unions and workplaces
- Identifying the core components of a gender policy, as recommended by unions and international bodies
- Learning from practical experiences, such as the case study of a trade union in Nepal
- Following a step-by-step guide to drafting, adopting, and implementing the policy, with templates and tools included in the annexures.

Unions that take proactive steps toward gender equality not only strengthen their democratic practices and credibility but also contribute to more just and equitable societies. This manual is your roadmap to making that vision a reality.

# 2. Why a Gender Policy?

## 2.1 Rationale: Why Unions Need a Gender Policy

Trade unions are built on principles of justice, fairness, and solidarity — yet gender-based discrimination and inequality remain pervasive challenges in workplaces and within unions themselves. Women and gender-diverse workers often face barriers such as underrepresentation in leadership, occupational segregation, pay gaps, unsafe workplaces, and exclusion from decision-making processes (Gender Policy Final, pptx, 2023; Draft Gender Policy for a Trade Union in Nepal, 2023).

A gender policy is a formal commitment by the union to confront these barriers systematically. It ensures that unions embody the same equity principles they advocate for externally, fostering internal credibility and strengthening their ability to represent all workers equitably. As the European Commission's Considering Gender in Regional Transformations Toolkit (2023) notes, integrating gender equality into institutional policies is essential to achieving fair, inclusive, and sustainable change.

In short, a gender policy is not just about compliance — it's about transforming the culture and practices of unions to reflect the diverse realities of their members, creating a safe, dignified, and empowering environment for all.

## 2.2 Benefits of Having a Gender Policy

Adopting and implementing a gender policy can bring multiple benefits to trade unions and their members, including:

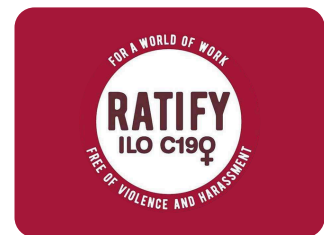
**1 Promoting inclusivity and diversity:**  
By ensuring that women, transgender, and gender-diverse workers have equal access to opportunities, the union becomes a more representative and credible voice for all workers.



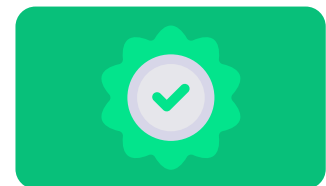
**2 Strengthening the union's bargaining power:**  
Diverse and inclusive unions can mobilize more members, increasing their negotiating strength with employers and policymakers (*Gender Policy Final.pptx*, 2023).



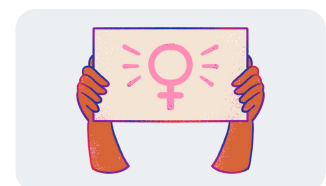
**3 Ensuring compliance with laws and standards:**  
A gender policy helps align union practices with national laws (such as India's *SHW Act*, 2013) and international conventions (like ILO C190), demonstrating the union's commitment to workers' rights (*FES India SHW Policy*, 2023; *FES HQ Policy*, 2023).



**4 Creating safer workplaces:**  
Policies that include mechanisms to prevent and respond to violence, harassment, and discrimination contribute to the safety and well-being of members (FES HQ, 2023).



**5 Building capacity for advocacy:**  
A gender policy enables unions to integrate gender concerns into collective bargaining agendas and broader social campaigns (*Draft Gender Policy for a Trade Union in Nepal*, 2023).



**6 Driving organizational learning and improvement:**  
As highlighted in the *Considering Gender in Regional Transformations Toolkit* (2023), implementing gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation fosters institutional learning and continuous improvement.



## 2.3 Alignment with National Laws and International Standards

Adopting a gender policy aligns unions with the growing global and national focus on gender equality at work. Key frameworks include:

- **National laws:**
  - India's *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013* mandates workplace safety and redressal mechanisms (*FES India SHW Policy, 2023*).
  - Similar legal obligations exist in many countries requiring equal pay, non-discrimination, and safe workplaces.
- International standards:
  - *ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206*, which address the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence (*FES HQ Policy, 2023*).
  - *UN Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*.
- Union commitments:
  - Parity rule (50:50 representation) and gender mainstreaming commitments
  - European Commission guidance on gender-responsive structural change and transitions (*EU Toolkit, 2023*).

By aligning with these standards, unions not only fulfill their obligations but also position themselves as progressive, accountable organizations that champion the rights of all workers.

## 3. Core Components of a Gender Policy

Gender equality within trade unions is not only a question of fairness but also of effectiveness. When unions reflect the diversity of the workers they represent, they are stronger, more credible, and more capable of advocating for equitable workplace practices. Yet, across South Asia and beyond, women and gender-diverse workers remain underrepresented in leadership, face unsafe and discriminatory workplaces, and struggle to reconcile paid and unpaid responsibilities — realities shaped by entrenched social and institutional barriers.

This section presents six interrelated components that a union's gender policy must address. Each draws on evidence from practice and research, illustrates why it matters, and offers concrete recommendations that unions can adopt.



### 3.1 Equal Representation



Trade unions have long been spaces of advocacy for workers' rights, but their own internal structures often mirror the gender inequalities they seek to address. Research consistently shows that women are underrepresented in decision-making roles even where they constitute a significant share of the workforce. This imbalance not only weakens the union's legitimacy but also limits its ability to represent the needs of all members effectively.

Gender-balanced leadership has been associated with more inclusive bargaining agendas, greater responsiveness to members' diverse concerns, and stronger organizational cohesion. Yet overcoming entrenched hierarchies requires more than goodwill — structural interventions such as quotas and targeted leadership development are essential.

**Example:**

In Nepal, the *General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions* (GEFONT) instituted a 33% quota for women in leadership roles, creating space for women to influence negotiations, policy decisions, and union priorities in meaningful ways.

**Recommendations:**

- Establish clear targets, such as a 50:50 quota or minimum representation thresholds, for leadership at all levels.
- Institutionalize Women's Committees or Gender Equality Committees to develop and support leadership pipelines.
- Amend constitutions and election rules to guarantee women and gender-diverse members equal access to candidacy and office.
- Collect and publish gender-disaggregated data regularly to monitor progress and identify gaps.

## 3.2 Safe and Inclusive Workplace



The persistence of harassment, violence, and discriminatory norms in workplaces remains one of the most significant deterrents to women's full participation in employment and union life. Studies have shown that unsafe environments foster fear and silence, discouraging workers from asserting their rights or engaging with unions (ILO, 2019).

Creating a culture of safety and respect — both in workplaces and within unions themselves — is foundational to building trust and legitimacy. A robust gender policy can align unions with international standards such as ILO C190 and national laws while affirming the union's commitment to dignity and justice.

**Example:**

The *Pakistan Workers' Federation* trained more than 400 union representatives on preventing workplace harassment, following the passage of national legislation on sexual harassment. Gender focal points in union branches now serve as resources for members facing abuse.

**Recommendations:**

- Adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward harassment, violence, and discrimination.
- Set up accessible, confidential, and impartial grievance mechanisms, such as Internal Complaints Committees, that extend to union spaces as well.
- Negotiate safety and inclusivity clauses into collective bargaining agreements.
- Conduct regular safety audits and awareness-raising workshops for members and leaders.

### 3.3 Work-Life Balance



The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work carried by women limits their opportunities to participate in the paid workforce and in union activities. Research underscores that without policies that address work-life balance, gender equality remains elusive (European Commission, 2023). For unions, advocating for care-responsive policies is both a strategic priority and a demonstration of solidarity with the realities of members' lives.

When unions press for parental leave, childcare support, and flexible work arrangements, they not only strengthen the position of women workers but also normalize shared caregiving responsibilities, benefitting all members. Internally, unions also need to adjust their own practices to make participation feasible for members with caregiving roles.

**Example:**

The *Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers' Union* in Sri Lanka successfully bargained for on-site childcare facilities and improved maternity leave for factory workers, which significantly improved women's attendance at union meetings and engagement in campaigns.

**Recommendations:**

- Negotiate for comprehensive parental leave, including paternity and adoptive leave, and advocate for accessible childcare services.
- Adjust union schedules and activity planning to accommodate members with caregiving responsibilities.
- Advocate for flexible work arrangements with employers, promoting shared responsibility for care work.
- Review collective agreements to include care-inclusive provisions.

## 3.4 Inclusive Advocacy and Bargaining



Gender equality must be integrated into the union's bargaining and advocacy priorities, rather than treated as an ancillary concern. A growing body of evidence shows that unions that mainstream gender into negotiations achieve better outcomes not only for women but for all workers by addressing systemic inequities and improving working conditions broadly.

Inclusive bargaining encompasses issues such as equal pay for equal work, maternity and paternity protections, and workplace safety from harassment and violence.

It also means unions speak up on broader societal issues that intersect with gender, such as privatization, public service quality, and migration.

### Example:

The *National Garment Workers Federation* in Bangladesh has successfully negotiated agreements with employers that include provisions on equal pay, maternity benefits, and grievance mechanisms for harassment, aligning their agreements with both national and international labor standards.

### Recommendations:

- Ensure collective bargaining agreements explicitly include gender equality clauses, including equal pay, maternity protections, and anti-discrimination measures.
- Use gender-sensitive language in all contracts and communications.
- Build alliances with women's organizations and civil society to strengthen advocacy and extend reach.
- Equip bargaining teams with training to identify and prioritize gender issues in negotiations.

## 3.5 Capacity Building



A gender policy is only as effective as the people tasked with implementing it. Organizational change requires sustained awareness-raising and skills development to overcome biases, build confidence, and prepare future leaders.

Studies of unions in South Asia highlight the impact of regular training on changing mindsets and empowering women to take on leadership roles. Mentorship programs, leadership workshops, and gender audits can all support this process.

**Example:**

Under a South Asia Regional Project, multi-country training workshops on gender and intersectionality were held for union leaders in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Many unions subsequently launched mentorship programs to support women in leadership pipelines.

**Recommendations:**

- Offer regular, mandatory training on gender equality, diversity, and intersectionality for all members.
- Establish mentorship programs that prepare women and gender-diverse members for leadership.
- Embed intersectional perspectives into all leadership development and educational programs.
- Evaluate training effectiveness and adjust programs based on member feedback.

### 3.6 Monitoring and Evaluation



Gender policies risk becoming symbolic unless unions track implementation and progress through systematic monitoring. Regular audits and evaluations help identify successes and gaps, ensuring that the policy evolves with members' needs.

Participatory audits also foster a sense of ownership and accountability among members, strengthening the union's internal democracy and responsiveness.

**Example:**

In Nepal, GEFONT conducts an annual gender audit that examines leadership representation, policy implementation, and member satisfaction. Audit findings have informed revisions to the union's constitution and strategies, making it a living, responsive framework.

**Recommendations:**

- Carry out periodic gender audits using participatory approaches.
- Develop measurable indicators to assess representation, safety, bargaining outcomes, and capacity building.
- Share results transparently with members and stakeholders, using findings to inform next steps.
- Update gender policies regularly to reflect lessons learned and emerging priorities.

## 4. Learning from Nepal: Insights and Lessons

In April 2025, a workshop on *Writing, Adopting, and Implementing Gender Policies for Trade Unions* brought together union representatives and facilitators in Kathmandu, Nepal, for two days of collaborative work. The workshop was designed not simply to discuss the importance of gender equality, but to equip participants with the tools, strategies, and confidence to begin drafting gender policies tailored to their own union contexts.

Participants engaged deeply with questions of leadership, inclusivity, and institutional change, underscoring that policies are most effective when they are grounded in members' lived experiences, informed by evidence, and shaped by the unique political, social, and cultural context of the union.

### 4.1 Why Local Context Matters

Throughout the workshop, it became evident that effective gender policies cannot be imported wholesale from international models or national directives. Participants highlighted how specific challenges—such as informal employment, unequal domestic responsibilities, and the absence of safe grievance mechanisms—manifest differently in their settings. Drafting policies that acknowledge and address these realities requires unions to listen closely to members and adapt approaches accordingly.

This reinforced the idea that while global best practices can inspire action, policies must ultimately reflect and respond to local needs. As one participant put it, “No one can write our policy for us — we have to write it ourselves.”

### 4.2 The Central Role of Gender Audits

A cornerstone of the workshop was the introduction of **gender audits**, which provided participants with a structured way to examine their own union practices and identify areas of bias or exclusion.

In small groups, participants conducted audits of key aspects of union functioning — recruitment, leadership, training, grievance mechanisms — using checklists and structured reflection tools. This process helped participants move beyond assumptions and surface specific gaps, such as underrepresentation of women in committees, lack of family-friendly policies, or barriers to reporting harassment.

These audits became the foundation for setting **SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals** tailored to each union's circumstances. Participants noted that the audit exercise demystified the process of policy drafting, showing that a strong policy begins with honest self-assessment and data-driven analysis.

### 4.3 Building Buy-in and Decentralized Action

Another key lesson was the need to secure leadership buy-in while also empowering members at all levels to contribute to policy implementation. Participants acknowledged that without senior leaders' commitment, gender policies often remain symbolic. At the same time, change cannot come from the top alone — it must be owned by members and embedded in daily practices.

The workshop's participatory structure modeled this principle, with group exercises, rotating discussions, and leadership circles fostering a sense of shared ownership and collective responsibility. Many participants left with the insight that decentralizing action — giving power to the people — not only increases buy-in but makes policies more sustainable and effective.

### 4.4 Participants Leave Ready to Act

By the end of the workshop, participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the **core components of a gender policy**, including equal representation, safe and inclusive workplaces, work-life balance, inclusive bargaining, capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation.

Armed with this knowledge and informed by their gender audit findings, each group drafted initial outlines of gender policies for their own unions. These drafts reflected both global principles and local realities, bridging the gap between aspiration and actionable change.

Participants left the workshop with renewed confidence, a roadmap of next steps, and a commitment to advocate for the adoption of their draft policies within their unions. As one participant reflected during the closing session, "Now we know where to start, and how to move forward."

## 5. Key Lessons from the Nepal Workshop

- **Start with evidence:** Gender audits are a practical and essential first step, allowing unions to identify concrete gaps and set priorities based on their own realities.
- **Policies must fit the context:** Local economic, social, and cultural factors should shape both policy content and implementation strategies.
- **Leadership matters — but so does member engagement:** Sustainable change requires both top-level endorsement and grassroots participation.
- **Focus on clarity and action:** Using SMART goals helps transform broad aspirations into specific, achievable commitments.
- **Shared ownership builds momentum:** Involving members in drafting and implementation fosters accountability and ensures policies are more than symbolic.

The Nepal experience underscores that gender equality in trade unions is not an abstract ideal but a practical, achievable goal — provided unions are willing to look inward, listen to their members, and take deliberate, informed action.

This workshop showed that with the right tools, support, and determination, unions can begin writing policies that reflect the dignity and aspirations of all their members — and take meaningful steps toward creating safer, fairer, and more inclusive workplaces.

## 6. Conclusion

Trade unions have always stood at the forefront of struggles for justice and dignity at work. Yet, as this manual highlights, the fight for gender equality within unions themselves remains unfinished. Too often, the same structural and cultural barriers that disadvantage women and gender-diverse workers in workplaces are reproduced in union spaces — in leadership, decision-making, representation, and workplace safety.

This manual has set out a clear and actionable path to change. It explains why unions cannot afford to ignore gender equality: not only because it is a matter of rights and fairness, but also because it strengthens unions' credibility, bargaining power, and relevance to all workers. It has detailed the six core components of a robust gender policy, providing evidence, examples, and recommendations to guide unions through the process of drafting, adopting, and implementing gender-responsive policies.

The lessons from Nepal serve as a reminder that change must start from within. Policies are not mere declarations but living commitments — shaped by the lived realities of members, informed by data and audits, and championed by leaders who see gender equality as central to the union’s mission. Decentralizing the process and empowering members at every level ensures that these commitments are not just written but implemented meaningfully.

The work of writing, adopting, and implementing a gender policy is not a one-off exercise. It is an ongoing process of reflection, learning, and adaptation. This manual provides the foundation, but the responsibility for action rests with union leaders, members, and allies who are ready to take the next step.

By embedding gender equality into their structures and culture, unions not only strengthen themselves but also contribute to building more just, equitable, and inclusive societies. The future of the labor movement depends on it.

👉 [Detailed Information on the workshop in Nepal can be found here](#)  
(Click the link above or scan the QR below)



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