



MECHANISMS FOR EVALUATING GENDER BALANCE IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of international mechanisms designed to evaluate gender balance within public administration. As governments worldwide commit to sustainable development goals and inclusive governance, the need for robust, evidence-based tools to measure gender equality has become paramount. The study examines a diverse array of approaches, from Vietnam's newly developed Public Sector Gender Equality Index and Ethiopia's pioneering Gender Audit Manual to Taiwan's performance management systems and the European Union's sophisticated audit frameworks. By synthesizing these international experiences, the article identifies common indicators, methodological innovations, and persistent challenges such as the "performance paradox" and the difficulty of capturing intersectional discrimination. The findings reveal a global trend towards mixed-methods evaluations that combine quantitative sex-disaggregated data with qualitative insights into workplace culture and agency. The article concludes that while no single model is universally applicable, the convergence on core principles—including participatory audits, institutional accountability mechanisms, and the measurement of both representation and substantive decision-making power—offers valuable lessons for states seeking to enhance gender balance in their public sectors.



Keywords: Gender balance, public administration, evaluation mechanisms, gender mainstreaming, performance audit, international experience, women's leadership, gender equality index.

Introduction

The pursuit of gender balance in public administration has transcended moral and social justice arguments to become a central tenet of good governance and institutional effectiveness. Contemporary research and policy frameworks increasingly recognize that the composition of public bureaucracies, particularly at leadership levels, directly impacts policy outcomes, citizen trust, and the quality of democratic representation. However, translating the commitment to gender equality into measurable progress requires sophisticated evaluation mechanisms that can diagnose barriers, track change, and hold institutions accountable. The international community has witnessed a proliferation of such tools over the past decade, each reflecting unique national contexts while contributing to a shared global understanding of what works. This article examines the landscape of gender balance evaluation mechanisms in public administration by drawing on case studies from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, with the aim of distilling transferable lessons and identifying emerging best practices.

The development of national-level gender equality indices represents a significant advancement in how states measure their progress. Vietnam offers a particularly instructive example, having recently launched its first Public Sector Gender Equality Index through a collaboration between the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, the Vietnam Women's Union, and Australian research institutions with support from the Australian government. This index was not created in a vacuum but was built upon a rigorous review of leading international frameworks, from which researchers distilled over sixty potential indicators down to ten core measures grouped into five critical areas. These areas include formal personnel procedures such as recruitment, planning, training, rotation, evaluation, and appointments, but they also extend into less tangible realms that are often overlooked in traditional assessments. The Vietnamese framework explicitly addresses the working environment, the burden of unpaid care work that disproportionately falls on women, social and cultural biases that shape



workplace dynamics, and mechanisms for ensuring bodily autonomy and protection against harassment . What makes the Vietnamese approach particularly noteworthy is its methodological pluralism.

Recognizing that quantitative data alone cannot capture the full picture, the index incorporates a set of forty-seven in-depth interview questions designed to uncover "invisible" barriers in the workplace, such as traditional expectations and limited access to complaint mechanisms. This mixed-methods approach allows evaluators to understand not just how many women hold positions at various levels, but why their representation may decline at higher echelons and what lived experiences shape their careers. Pilot testing of this index, conducted in partnership with Griffith University in Australia, has already yielded preliminary insights that challenge simplistic assumptions about gender balance, revealing that while women may constitute over forty-five percent of public sector employees in surveyed agencies, structural barriers continue to limit their access to senior management positions, with a pronounced "discontinuity" appearing at the point of leadership appointments .

Parallel developments in Africa demonstrate how evaluation mechanisms can be embedded within existing institutional frameworks to enhance their legitimacy and impact. Ethiopia's Office of the Federal Audit General, with technical and financial support from UN Women and donor partners including Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands, developed and implemented the country's first-ever Gender Audit Manual in 2024 . This initiative represents a significant innovation by integrating gender equality assessment directly into the mandate and methodologies of the supreme audit institution. Prior to the manual's introduction, gender considerations in government audits were ad hoc and superficial, lacking the detailed criteria necessary to produce visible findings. The new comprehensive manual transformed this landscape by enabling audit experts to conduct performance audits of gender equality across ministries and government agencies with unprecedented rigor. The pilot audit conducted at the Ministry of Health, which examined selected hospitals, exemplifies the power of this approach. Auditors were able to identify and quantify the costs of gender gaps in the health sector, including unsafe child deliveries, improper family planning services, and a lack of focus on diseases that disproportionately affect women . Crucially, the audit process did not stop at diagnosis but extended to



accountability and remediation. Findings and recommendations were formally presented to the Ethiopian Parliament as part the Office of the Federal Audit General's annual report, and the Ministry of Health was compelled to develop an action plan to address the identified issues. The Ethiopian case demonstrates that when gender evaluation mechanisms are housed within authoritative institutions like audit offices and linked to parliamentary oversight, they gain enforcement power that standalone initiatives often lack. As officials from the Office of the Federal Audit General noted, the application of the gender audit manual has become part of their annual strategic planning, signaling a deep institutionalization of gender equality as a core component of public sector performance .

In East Asia, Taiwan's experience with performance management for gender mainstreaming at the local government level offers critical insights into the complex dynamics between evaluation mechanisms and the policy environments in which they operate. The "Guidance Program for Promoting Gender Equality by Municipal and County Governments," implemented by the Executive Yuan's Department of Gender Equality since 2016, has been the subject of detailed academic study revealing both its achievements and its limitations . Research based on interviews with local government civil servants, civil society representatives, and central government officials demonstrates that the effectiveness of such evaluation mechanisms is profoundly moderated by what scholars term the "policy environment." This environment encompasses political support from elected officials, the perceptions and commitments of bureaucrats at various levels, the availability of organizational resources, and external factors such as major social events. The Taiwanese case illuminates how the same performance management system can produce dramatically different outcomes depending on local conditions. Where political figures demonstrated active support and high-level civil servants valued the policy goals, the evaluation mechanism facilitated cross-departmental collaboration and innovation. However, the study also identified significant "performance paradox" phenomena, where the act of measuring performance distorts the very activities being measured. Examples included senior civil servants demanding the concealment of data that might reflect poorly on their agencies, high turnover among responsible personnel leading to loss of institutional knowledge and



gaming of the system, and civil society representatives becoming so focused on helping agencies meet performance indicators that they inadvertently undermined the authenticity of reporting . These findings underscore a vital lesson for all countries developing gender evaluation mechanisms: indicators and benchmarks are not neutral technical tools but become embedded in complex organizational politics that can either amplify or undermine their intended effects. The Taiwanese experience suggests that successful evaluation requires not only well-designed metrics but also attention to bureaucratic incentives, capacity building for implementing officials, and mechanisms to ensure that the pursuit of measurable outcomes does not displace the substantive goal of gender equality. European approaches to gender evaluation in the public sector tend to emphasize standardization and cross-national comparability while also pushing the boundaries of what measurement can capture. The European Union’s research and innovation framework has spawned sophisticated tools such as the Gender Equality Audit and Monitoring tool, developed through the ACT project and now being advanced by the INSPIRE initiative . This survey-based instrument delves into employee experiences across multiple dimensions including working conditions, perceived discrimination, experiences of sexual harassment, and micro-aggressions. What distinguishes the European approach is its explicit attention to intersectionality, the recognition that gender inequality intersects with other axes of disadvantage including race, ethnicity, disability, and age to produce unique patterns of discrimination. The latest iteration of the tool aims to enhance its applicability across diverse institutional contexts including higher education and the private sector, and it enables the development of multi-level models that can analyze data across countries and organization types. By combining datasets from multiple institutions, researchers can examine categories that might have insufficient response rates within any single organization, allowing for more robust intersectional analyses . This European innovation highlights an important direction for the field: as evaluation mechanisms mature, they must move beyond binary comparisons of men and women to capture the heterogeneous experiences within gender categories.

Spain’s Valencian Community provides a focused examination of one specific evaluation tool, the ex-ante gender impact assessment report, which is required for proposed policies and regulations . A meta-evaluation of 268 such reports



produced between 2015 and 2022 assessed their institutionalization and quality across multiple dimensions. The findings revealed a paradox common to many gender mainstreaming efforts: while the requirement for impact assessments was widespread, the quality of analysis was often low, and institutionalization remained weak despite formal compliance. The researchers proposed concrete mechanisms for improving quality, including systematic monitoring and evaluation of the assessment reports themselves. This meta-evaluative approach, evaluating the evaluators, represents a crucial evolution in thinking about gender balance mechanisms. It acknowledges that simply mandating gender analysis is insufficient; the rigor and utility of that analysis must itself be subject to scrutiny and continuous improvement.

A particularly innovative application of gender evaluation mechanisms comes from Lebanon, where the Internal Security Forces undertook a staff-led participatory gender audit with support from Siren Associates and funding from the Government of Canada . This process, guided by International Labour Organization participatory audit guidelines and organizational self-assessment tools developed by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, adapted global methodologies to the unique context of a security agency operating during an acute economic crisis. The formation of an internal gender audit team comprising both ranking and non-ranking operational and administrative staff, balanced between men and women, fostered institutional ownership and sustainability. The team, mentored by external experts, designed and implemented a mixed-methods research protocol including the first national-level staff survey ever conducted within the Internal Security Forces and multiple rounds of key informant interviews. The process produced twenty-two actionable recommendations for improving the agency's gender responsiveness, and its timing proved critical as the Internal Security Forces prepared to hire eight hundred new staff, fifty percent of whom were women. The Lebanese case demonstrates that evaluation mechanisms can serve not only diagnostic purposes but also capacity-building functions, enhancing the technical knowledge and autonomy of internal champions who can drive long-term organizational change. At the global level, initiatives like the Measures for Advancing Gender Equality initiative, led by the World Bank's Africa Gender Innovation Lab and the Living Standards Measurement Study in collaboration with multiple research



institutions, are working to broaden and deepen the measurement of women's agency. While not exclusively focused on public administration, this initiative has developed and validated twenty-four innovative tools across fifteen countries that capture dimensions of agency often missing from traditional evaluations. These include ownership and control over assets, goal-setting and decision-making processes, and sense of control and efficacy. The integration of such tools into large-scale surveys conducted by national statistical offices represents an opportunity to move public sector evaluations beyond simple counts of female employees toward more nuanced understandings of whether women possess genuine decision-making power and the ability to shape their work environments. The MAGNET initiative's engagement with national statistical systems highlights the importance of embedding gender evaluation within official data collection infrastructure to ensure sustainability and policy relevance.

Fourth, there is growing recognition that evaluating gender balance requires examining not only representation but also institutional culture and individual agency. The Vietnamese index's attention to workplace environment and harassment mechanisms, the European audit tool's focus on micro-aggressions and perceived discrimination, and the MAGNET initiative's measurement of sense of control all point toward a more holistic understanding of what gender equality in public administration truly means. A woman may be present in a leadership role but marginalized in decision-making processes; an organization may have equal numbers of men and women but maintain a culture that penalizes caregiving responsibilities or tolerates subtle discrimination. Evaluation mechanisms must be sophisticated enough to detect these conditions. Fifth, participatory approaches that involve staff at all levels and foster internal ownership appear to enhance the impact and sustainability of evaluation efforts. The Lebanese Internal Security Forces' experience with a staff-led audit team that continues to advance recommendations demonstrates how evaluation can build lasting capacity rather than producing a one-time report.

The international experience also highlights persistent challenges that require ongoing attention. The cost and technical expertise required for sophisticated mixed-methods evaluations can be prohibitive, particularly for lower-income countries or smaller agencies. There is a tension between the desire for standardized, comparable indicators and the need for context-specific approaches



that capture local realities. The risk of performance paradox, where the measurement process distorts the phenomena being measured, remains ever-present. The difficulty of capturing intersectional discrimination, while increasingly recognized, continues to outpace methodological capacity in many contexts. And the gap between evaluation findings and policy action, between diagnosis and remedy, remains stubbornly wide in many cases.

In conclusion, the international experience with mechanisms for evaluating gender balance in public administration offers a rich tapestry of innovation, experimentation, and learning. From Vietnam's comprehensive index and Ethiopia's audit integration to Taiwan's performance management insights and Lebanon's participatory approach, governments and civil society organizations are developing increasingly sophisticated tools to measure what matters and drive change. While no single model can be transplanted wholesale from one context to another, the convergence on core principles, mixed methods, institutional embedding, attention to culture and agency, and participatory ownership provides a valuable guide for any state committed to understanding and advancing gender balance in its public sector. The next frontier for this field lies in strengthening the links between evaluation and action, ensuring that the insights generated by these mechanisms translate into tangible improvements in the lives of women in public administration and, through them, into more inclusive and effective governance for all citizens.

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