

TAF

Best Practice Guide

Encouraging Female Participation
in Trade Associations



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Trade associations play a critical role in shaping sectors, influencing policy and supporting members to succeed.

Yet across many associations, women remain underrepresented in leadership, governance and decision-making spaces.

The Trade Association Forum asked associations for examples of how they are supporting female participation and female-led businesses. This guide brings together their suggestions and examples into ten practical strategies associations can use to become more inclusive.

We hope that they help to spark conversations and discussions in your association.

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1. Put women at the centre of decision-making

In many sectors, leadership pipelines and governance structures have historically been male-dominated. Without visible female representation, decision-making spaces can appear inaccessible, and policies and priorities may not reflect women's lived experience.

Suggested Actions:

- Set a clear ambition for strong female representation across boards, councils, committees and working groups.
- Review nomination and election processes for structural barriers.
- Track and report gender balance in your governance structures.
- Ensure women hold visible leadership roles in your association.

2. Design governance to remove participation barriers

Traditional governance models can favour those with time, flexibility, proximity or established networks. Women, particularly those with caring responsibilities, can be disproportionately excluded.

Suggested Actions:

- Introduce transparent election, appointment and succession processes.
- Offer hybrid and online participation options as standard.
- Publish clear role descriptions and time commitments.
- Rotate meeting times to accommodate different schedules.

3. Proactively invite women to participate

Relying solely on self-nomination often reproduces existing imbalances. Confidence gaps and historic exclusion can limit applications from women.

Suggested Actions:

- Actively identify and invite female members with relevant expertise to participate in your association's activities and leadership forums.
- Encourage committee and group chairs to widen participation beyond familiar networks.
- Offer informal conversations to demystify roles and responsibilities.
- Communicate that diverse leadership styles are valued.



4. Create formal routes for female voices to shape policy

Influence often sits with the most established or vocal businesses in an association, where male voices can dominate. Without structured engagement, female members and female-led businesses may be underrepresented.

Suggested Actions:

- Run regular member surveys to gather evidence on barriers and growth challenges to ensure diverse voices are represented in your work
- Establish representative advisory boards and working groups that feed directly into strategy.
- Hold regional engagement sessions to capture diverse lived experiences.
- Use varied member case studies in government and parliamentary engagement.

5. Help to tackle gender gaps in access to finance and growth capital

Female-led businesses are less likely to secure external finance and typically start with lower levels of capital. Associations can play an important role in supporting these businesses.

Suggested Actions:

- Provide guidance on investment readiness, pitching, and financial forecasting.
- Offer mentoring from members who have secured finance.
- Facilitate introductions to lenders and investors.
- Gather sector-specific data on funding disparities.
- Showcase successful female-led growth stories.



6. Identify and challenge policies that have unintended gender impacts

Many policies are written as gender-neutral but can have unequal effects in practice. Access to finance, eligibility thresholds, tax structures, parental support for the self-employed, and procurement rules can all shape who is able to start, sustain and scale a business. Trade associations are well placed to identify where these frameworks unintentionally disadvantage women and to advocate for change.

Suggested Actions:

- Review major policy areas affecting your sector through a gender lens.
- Gather evidence from female members on how policy affects growth, hiring and sustainability.
- Identify eligibility criteria or thresholds that exclude early-stage or under-capitalised businesses.

7. Make learning and progression genuinely accessible

Traditional training models can exclude those balancing senior leadership with caring responsibilities.

Suggested Actions:

- Offer blended and online learning options.
- Record sessions for flexible access.
- Develop leadership and commercial skills programmes that use female leaders as role models and case studies.
- Support apprenticeship and progression pathways with young women in mind. Could you offer a female-only cohort?

8. Make female leadership visible and normal

When women are visibly absent from your association events, publications and content, it reinforces perceptions about who holds authority.

Suggested Actions:

- Review major policy areas affecting your sector through a gender lens.
- Gather evidence from female members on how policy affects growth, hiring and sustainability.
- Identify eligibility criteria or thresholds that exclude early-stage or under-capitalised businesses.



9. Work with partners to widen support networks

Associations cannot address every barrier alone. Working collaboratively across sectors can support better female engagement and participation.

Suggested Actions:

- Collaborate with regulatory and consumer protection bodies.
- Engage with education and skills organisations.
- Work with women-focused industry networks.
- Participate in cross-sector diversity initiatives.

10. Measure participation and act on the data

Without data, disparities and progress to address them remain invisible.

Suggested Actions:

- Collect gender-disaggregated data for events, training, and other association meetings and activities.
- Analyse and discuss engagement patterns.
- Consider the value of gender based engagement targets to drive action and profile in your association
- Publish insights where appropriate and trial new ways to drive up female engagement.
- Adjust association activities based on data and evidence.



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