



***WIS Men* for Gender
Equality Group**

GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

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Foreword

Across the world, men are increasingly examining their roles, responsibilities and privileges in relation to gender equality. At NATO, gender equality means that everyone has the same opportunities, rights, resources and respect, regardless of their gender. Historically, the security sector has often promoted notions of force, dominance and lethality, and has therefore created spaces that appeared more attractive and empowering for men. While much progress has been made to change this, including through national policies and action plans, we are still far away from making gender equality a reality for all.

Structures such as WIIS@NATO have offered platforms for learning, professional development and women's leadership coaching for many years. Despite this, women remain significantly under-represented in many parts of the Alliance. In 2022, women made up on average only about 12.7% of the armed forces of NATO member and partner states, up from 10.3% in 2014 ([European Parliamentary Research Service](#), 2025). Within NATO's civilian staff posts, women account for around 27%, with even lower representation at senior levels ([NATO](#), 2022). No statistics are available for military posts but anecdotal evidence suggests that numbers of women personnel are much lower. This means that most decisions affecting security and defense are still taken in contexts where men are the majority.

More gender-equal teams and gender-informed planning improves information sharing, reduces blind spots and strengthens NATO's ability to protect civilians and build trust with communities. To achieve this, however, more needs to be done to engage all of us in achieving gender equality.

Men as Allies

Achieving gender equality is not just a women's issue, nor should the responsibility for creating more gender-equitable workplaces rest with women alone. When we focus only on women, we risk treating gender inequalities as individual issues rather than as the outcome of systemic power relations that require structural change. Just as gender inequalities harm people of all genders, more gender-equal societies benefit everyone, including men. Promoting equality enables men to question traditional gender labels and the unrealistic expectations and pressures that many societies place on them, instead allowing for a fuller, healthier and more diverse range of roles and experiences.

Men who act as allies for gender equality use their position and influence to help shift these systems. They can positively disrupt the workplace culture and organizational structures which inhibit equality and fairness for all. Men play a crucial role in realizing a more gender-equal NATO, both because it is in line with our values and because men also benefit from more gender-equitable workplaces. By getting involved, joining a *WIIS Men* group or trying out the advice included in this document, you can be an ally in WIIS' work to create a fairer and more inclusive NATO.



About WIIS@NATO

Founded in 1987, [Women In International Security \(WIIS\)](#) is a non-governmental organization that champions women leaders in the international peace and security sector by providing professional growth opportunities for women, leading research projects and policy engagement initiatives, and nurturing a community of mentors, advocates, experts, and leaders. WIIS@NATO is an antenna of WIIS Brussels based at NATO Headquarters in Brussels.



Male allies are "men committed to **building positive relationships with women**, taking into consideration the inequalities present in the world today and **taking everyday actions** to address them."

The HeForShe campaign initiated by the United Nations

The challenge is clear. The responsibility must be shared. The time to act is now.

Join the *WIIS Men* and commit to being part of a NATO that reflects the values we defend, with fairness, dignity and respect for all.

Why do we need a *WIIS Men for Gender Equality Group*?

WIIS@NATO has always valued the courage of its members to have difficult and honest conversations. WIIS chapters across Europe have made significant progress in shifting narratives and strengthening women's roles in the security sector. However, we recognize that we cannot achieve meaningful and long-lasting gender equality without fully involving men and boys in this effort.

By engaging men as allies for gender equality we can create workplaces that are healthier and more inclusive, where everyone can speak up, contribute and thrive. We also strengthen decision-making by building teams that are more diverse, better able to analyze complex situations and more resilient in the face of stress and change.

In practice, this can mean that planning teams better understand how operations affect women and men differently, that staff meetings leave more room for different voices, or that leaders are better able to recognize and address harmful behaviors before they undermine morale and cohesion. A *WIIS Men* group offers a dedicated platform for men to explore these issues, ask questions, and, in collaboration with women, develop practical allyship that supports NATO's mission.

Why should men care about gender equality?

Gender equality is more than achieving parity in numbers or increasing the visibility of women leaders. It is about understanding how power and expectations around gender operate within individuals, institutions and wider society.

Norms around masculinity and gender influence how people think, behave and relate to one another. They can be expressed through everyday attitudes, workplace policies, informal practices and widely shared narratives. These norms often disadvantage women and non-binary individuals, who face barriers, discrimination or exclusion. However, they also restrict men. In many societies, and particularly in the security and defense sector, men may feel pressure always to appear strong, decisive and in control. Asking for help, showing vulnerability or even talking about stress can be seen as signs of weakness. For instance, men may feel unable to decline consecutive high-pressure deployments or to request flexible working for caregiving, even when it is offered to them. Over time, these pressures can contribute to poor mental health, strained relationships and burnout.

By promoting gender equality, we do not only address inequalities that affect women and others; we also create space for men to live healthier, more balanced lives. Men who act as allies for gender equality can develop more authentic and trusting relationships, both at home and at work. They listen to the experiences of women and under-represented colleagues; challenge sexist jokes, harassment and micro-aggressions; support women's leadership and visibility; and create more cohesive and effective teams. They can model contemporary leadership skills that are based on respect, fairness and empathy, rather than on fear or dominance. In these ways, engaging men in gender equality is directly linked to NATO's mission and performance. For men at NATO, allyship should be both a personal commitment and a core professional competency.



Your role as an Ally for Gender Equality means:

- 1 Commit to empathize with the lived experiences of women, non-binary colleagues and other underrepresented groups within NATO.
- 2 Speak up when you see behaviors, language and policies that perpetuate inequality.
- 3 Use your networks, decision making power and credibility to open doors and amplify voices that are often overlooked.
- 4 Show that respect and empathy are strengths and not weaknesses in security and defense.

What is this Guidance Document?

This Guidance Document is based on good practice and on consultations with NATO staff and WIIS@NATO members. It is designed to inspire and guide NATO staff in establishing *WIIS Men* for Gender Equality Groups ("*WIIS Men*" groups) that engage men across the organization to foster gender equality at NATO. Above all, it invites men to see allyship as part of professional excellence in security and defense.

The document presents a practical framework that can be used to start a new *WIIS Men* group, to consolidate early efforts, and to expand or replicate successful initiatives. It offers suggestions rather than strict rules, and it is intended to be adapted to different sections, divisions and teams.

You do not need to be a gender expert to use this Guidance Document. Curiosity, respect and a willingness to learn are enough.



Who is this document for?

This document is intended for any staff member at NATO Headquarters who is interested in taking an active role to support gender equality. It speaks particularly to NATO staff members who would like to create a platform for advancing allyship for gender equality by starting or joining a *WIIS Men* for Gender Equality Group.

It is also relevant for men who are already involved in women's support groups at NATO, such as WIIS@NATO's wider membership, or members of the RISE Staff Reference Group, who would like to increase men's participation in their activities. It may also be useful for managers and leaders who want to encourage their teams to engage more deeply with gender equality.

The guide aims to ensure that staff at all levels can contribute to meaningful cultural and structural changes that foster collaboration and shared responsibility for gender equality across the organization.



How should this document be used?

This Guidance Document provides ideas and strategies that can help NATO staff conceive and establish the first *WIIS Men* group and, if there is interest, scale and replicate such groups. It is intended to be used as a flexible roadmap and not as a rigid protocol or procedure.

Neither this document nor the *WIIS Men* groups they promote are intended to create or strengthen informal male-only platforms or networks. Such networks can be exclusive and can work against gender equality outcomes. Instead, *WIIS Men* groups should function as visible, accountable platforms where men explore their role in promoting gender equality and where they support, rather than replace, existing structures and women-led initiatives.

Throughout this document, you will find nine key steps for establishing, managing and growing a *WIIS Men* group, along with reflections on examples of possible activities, responding to backlash, and suggestions for further reading. You are encouraged to adapt these ideas to your context while remaining aligned with WIIS@NATO's principles and NATO's broader values.



Establishing a *WIIS Men* for Gender Equality Group at WIIS@NATO

Before getting started

Before launching *WIIS Men*, it is useful to consider your starting point and put a few foundations in place.

First, **choose your leadership team strategically**. Leadership is particularly important at the beginning of a new initiative. Try to bring together a small team that combines influence, lived experience and practical skills. This may mean including a senior staff member who can champion the group, a colleague with strong facilitation or organizational skills, and individuals who have personal or professional experience working on equality or inclusion.

Second, use your initial meetings to **establish a strong justification for *WIIS Men*** and for men's allyship at NATO more broadly. It can be helpful to link gender equality clearly to NATO's core roles. For example, you may wish to explore how gender equality and inclusive leadership contribute to better performance and innovation, more effective crisis management, improved talent attraction and retention, and a stronger organizational culture.

Finally, before launch, it is useful to prepare a **short workplan** for the first few sessions. This might outline the main themes you plan to discuss, ideas for inviting guest speakers, how you intend to communicate about the group, and how you will attract and welcome your first members.



Step

1

Gather

Once you are ready to begin, convene your first meeting. It is important that this initial gathering is well planned and executed.

In the first session, take time to establish a respectful and non-judgmental space where men can ask questions and express their views without fear of ridicule or punishment for "saying the wrong thing". If helpful, you can agree on simple ground rules at the beginning, such as listening without interruption, maintaining confidentiality where appropriate, and avoiding personal attacks.

It is also useful to emphasize that *WIIS Men* groups are intended to be democratic spaces. Usual hierarchy and rank should not determine whose voice is heard. Military and civilian staff, staff of different grades, teams and backgrounds should all feel able to participate on an equal footing.

Tip: You do not need a large group to begin. A few committed individuals are enough to start a meaningful conversation. Over time, others will join if they recognize the value.



Step 2 Reflect and recognize

Reflection is a central part of allyship. Early sessions can be used to reflect on personal and professional experiences related to gender.

Participants can be invited to think about how their own privileges, vulnerabilities and challenges have been shaped by gender norms, patriarchal structures and unconscious biases. Some may choose to share experiences of feeling pressure to behave in certain ways because they are men, or of witnessing unfair treatment of colleagues.

In facilitating these discussions, it can be helpful to frame the conversation away from blaming individual men, and towards understanding patriarchy and rigid gender norms as broader systems that distribute power unevenly. These systems affect everyone, but they often have particularly negative consequences for women, non-binary people and other groups that face discrimination.

Tip: If micro-aggression or discriminatory remarks arise during discussion, they should be addressed promptly but constructively. This helps model the respectful culture the group aims to promote.



Step 3 Listen

Listening is essential for meaningful allyship. *WIIS Men* groups should create space not only for men to speak, but to listen, as a group and as individuals, to the experiences of others.

This includes listening to women and non-binary colleagues, especially those whose voices may have been marginalized in the past, and listening to colleagues who have experienced discrimination, exclusion or harassment. Hearing how workplace culture is perceived by those who are often under-represented can challenge assumptions and provide important insights. Consider inviting a panel of women from different departments within NATO to share short testimonies on everyday barriers and what helps overcome them.

Listening also includes paying attention to the experiences of men who wish to reflect on relationships, fatherhood, mental health or workplace pressures. Many of these topics are closely linked to gender norms and can open up valuable conversations about how gender equality benefits everyone.

Tip: As the group develops, it can be useful to seek feedback from both members and non-members about how the group is perceived and where it can have the most positive impact. This will help ensure that the *WIIS Men* group remains accountable and relevant.



Step 4

Develop clear terminology, messaging and positions

To speak confidently about gender equality and allyship at NATO, it is important for the group to develop a shared understanding of key terms and core messages.

This does not require complex jargon. In fact, using straightforward, accessible language makes it easier for more staff to engage. The group can agree on simple definitions of concepts such as gender, gender equality, gender mainstreaming and allyship, and can discuss how these concepts relate to everyday work at NATO.

Care should be taken to avoid stereotypes and generalizations about gender roles. For example, it is more helpful to focus on individual strengths and skills than to characterize groups of people based on their gender. Language that emphasizes professional identity first—for instance, talking about “soldiers who are women” rather than “female soldiers”—can also be useful.

Tip: Developing clear and consistent messages about the role of *WIIS Men*, and about the benefits of gender equality in NATO operations, will help members speak about the group with confidence and clarity when engaging with colleagues and leadership.

Example discussion prompts include:

- 1 Can you think of a time in a meeting or planning group when a woman’s point was overlooked or repeated by a man who received the credit?
- 2 Consider how often women in your team are asked to organize social events, take notes, or provide support, compared to men.
- 3 Envision a working day in the life of the day in the life of a pregnant or breastfeeding officer. Do they have sufficient access to facilities? What concessions are made with regards to duties, uniform, wellbeing, working environment etc.?



Step 5

Integrate *WIIS Men* activities into other gender frameworks at NATO

WIIS Men groups should work with, and add value to, existing gender equality frameworks at NATO, while remaining distinct from staff reference groups and NATO-led initiatives. A *WIIS Men* group is not a replacement for staff structures that already exist, but rather a focused space where men can explore allyship and their contribution to broader gender initiatives.

This may involve collaborating with Gender Focal Points, the WPS Office, HR colleagues and other staff working on diversity, inclusion and wellbeing. By learning about existing priorities and workplans, the group can identify areas where men’s allyship can support and complement ongoing efforts.

Tip: Consider contributing to training and awareness-raising activities, supporting initiatives that address sexual harassment and discrimination, or helping to promote a culture of inclusive leadership in different parts of the organization.



Step 6

Speak out as allies

A key aspect of allyship is the willingness to speak out. *WIIS Men* can support its members to recognize when it is appropriate to intervene and how to do so constructively.

Speaking out can take many forms. It may mean challenging sexist jokes or micro-aggressions in a meeting, supporting a colleague who has been interrupted or dismissed, or questioning decisions that seem to disadvantage certain groups of staff. It may also involve advocating for more inclusive practices in planning, operations or policy development.

To be effective, speaking out should be done in a way that encourages learning and accountability rather than fear or division. *WIIS Men* groups can discuss (and even practice) how to respond in real scenarios, share strategies and learn from each other's experiences.

Tip: Visible support from senior leaders, both military and civilian, can also be very helpful. When senior figures publicly endorse *WIIS Men* and gender equality initiatives, it sends a strong message that allyship is aligned with NATO's values and expectations.



Step 7

Grow the group

Once a *WIIS Men* group is established, attention should turn to growth and sustainability. Growth does not only mean increasing numbers; it also means deepening engagement and strengthening impact.

The group can raise awareness of its existence and purpose through internal communication channels, informal networks and collaboration with other staff groups. It can explain the benefits of participation, such as opportunities to develop leadership skills, to learn from diverse colleagues and to contribute to a more respectful and effective workplace.

Public activities, such as talks, panel discussions, film screenings or events linked to dates like International Women's Day or the 16 Days of Activism, can help build visibility. Sharing stories of positive change and highlighting the contributions of male allies can also encourage others to join.

Tip: As the group grows, remain inclusive and welcome members of different ages, genders, nationalities and professional backgrounds. This diversity enriches discussions and keeps the group grounded in realities across the organization. New members may also add diversity to a "mentor pool" should members choose to take part in other WIIS activities.



Step 8

Knowledge management

Documenting the activities and impact of *WIIS Men* is important for learning, accountability and sustainability. The group may decide to set specific goals and indicators to track progress. These could include the number and type of activities organized, levels of participation, feedback from members, or examples of changes in behavior or practice. Regular reflection on what is working well and what could be improved will help the group maintain momentum and adjust its approach when needed.

Tip: By documenting its work, the group can also share lessons learned with other parts of NATO and with external partners. This can contribute to a wider body of knowledge on engaging men in gender equality in security and defense institutions.



Step 9

Ensuring the sustainability of *WIIS Men*

For *WIIS Men* to have lasting impact, activities need to be anchored in *WIIS@NATO*'s structures and culture, not only in the enthusiasm of a few individuals. Considering the below recommendations will ensure that *WIIS Men* is sustainable.



Institutional anchoring and leadership: A brief Terms of Reference can clarify the purpose and scope of *WIIS Men*. Establish a small core team and rotate roles such as convenor, event lead or communications focal point every 18-24 months. Create informal linkages with structures such as *WIIS@NATO*, Gender Focal Points, the WPS office, HR or Staff Reference Groups.



Planning and recognition: Develop an annual workplan with a limited number of realistic objectives. Review progress at least annually, capturing lessons and sharing key achievements with *WIIS@NATO* and NATO leadership. Encourage managers to treat participation in *WIIS Men* as part of professional development, recognizing it in performance dialogues.



Onboarding, handover and learning: Introduce *WIIS Men* in orientation briefings and onboarding materials and include these responsibilities in handover notes when staff rotate posts. Use the knowledge management practices described in Step 8 to record activities and results and share short summaries and testimonies to maintain momentum and demonstrate added value over time.

Managing Backlash



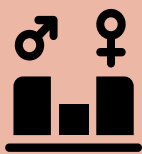
Efforts to advance gender equality can sometimes be misunderstood or met with resistance. This resistance, or backlash, can take many forms. It may be subtle, for example in the form of jokes or eye-rolling, or more overt, such as open criticism or attempts to undermine activities.

It is important to distinguish between reluctance, genuine questions or concerns, and deliberate backlash. Not everyone will feel immediately comfortable with conversations about gender equality. Some staff may worry that gender initiatives are politically motivated, are not relevant to their core duties, or will disadvantage them.

WISS Men can help reduce backlash by:



Emphasizing how gender equality supports NATO's mission, decision-making and the wellbeing of every staff member. Use concrete examples where inclusive practices improved outcomes.



Stressing that gender equality is not about blaming men or taking opportunities from them but about creating fairer and more effective systems for everyone.



Creating open spaces for debate to allow people to express concerns (even anonymously) without being dismissed, while maintaining zero tolerance to disrespect, personal attack and discriminatory remarks



Identifying respected leaders, both military and civilian, who can model allyship. When colleagues see that leaders take gender equality seriously and view it as part of professional excellence, it becomes easier to see it as a shared responsibility rather than an optional extra.



Clearly communicating the group's strategic goals, sources of funding and decision-making processes. Share progress updates openly to reduce suspicions and misinformation.

Examples of successful activities for engaging male staff as allies for gender equality in similar institutions

Other large multinational organizations that have successfully engaged male staff in gender equality work tend to use a mix of approaches. Here are some example strategies and ideas for implementation drawn from these institutions:

Activity	Description	Example	Tools and/or Reference
Workshops and Seminars	Organize regular workshops focusing on topics such as allyship, understanding privilege, and the impact of gender stereotypes in the workplace, using interactive activities to facilitate discussion.	Run scenario-based exercises where participants map how a proposed operation or mission affects women, men, boys and girls differently. Discuss implications for operations at NATO.	HeForShe Barbershop Toolkit
Integrating Data-Driven Approach	Use statistics and case studies to demonstrate the positive impact of gender diversity on organizational performance. Share data with all NATO staff through posters, newsletters and team briefings	Present NATO-wide data on women's representation in Allied armed forces and NATO civilian posts, with case studies where integrating gender perspectives improved mission outcomes or decision-making in operations and exercises.	See the Brussels Binder Allyship Report (2023) or publications by Equipundo
Events	Host events that celebrate gender equality, encouraging male staff participation in planning and delivery to highlight allyship and shared responsibility.	Co-organize an International Women's Day event at NATO Headquarters where <i>WIIS Men</i> members moderate a panel on "Gender, operational performance and leadership", including military and civilian speakers.	See the events hosted by the OSCE to engage men and women in gender equality.
Feedback Mechanisms	Create anonymous channels for staff to provide feedback on gender initiatives and their personal experiences, identifying areas for improvement and growing engagement.	Launch an anonymous online survey for staff in a NATO division or command to share experiences of inclusion, micro-aggressions and allyship, and discuss aggregated findings in <i>WIIS Men</i> sessions with follow-up commitments to leadership.	Read about the #UNDPListens initiative .
Highlight Role Models	Share stories of successful male figures in gender equality and implement recognition programmes that celebrate male employees	Profile male officers and senior civilians who have championed gender perspectives in recent NATO exercises or operations and highlight the operational difference it made.	See the approaches of the HeForShe Initiative for guidance.
Continuous Learning	Encourage ongoing education about gender issues by providing access to resources, articles and research through a recommended reading list or learning series.	Create a <i>WIIS Men</i> "reading and reflection series" where NATO staff periodically discuss short pieces on masculinities, WPS and allyship, linking each text to concrete questions about NATO's culture and operations.	See publications by the MenEngage Alliance and the extensive XY Database

Further Resources

Key Definitions

Gender: The social attributes associated with being male and female, learned through socialization, that determine a person's position and value in a given context, including in the relationship between women and men and girls and boys, as well as in the relations between women and those between men.

Gender Equality: The state in which there are equal rights, responsibilities, opportunities and access for men, women, boys and girls.

Gender Mainstreaming: A strategy used to achieve gender equality by assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, in all areas and at all levels, in order to assure that the concerns and experiences of both sexes are taken into account.

Inclusion: The achievement of a work environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute fully to an organization's success.

The above definitions are drawn from the NATO Term Database of recognized NATO terminology

The topics listed below can inspire dialogue and reflection in the early stages of *WIIS Men*. They can be used as themes for meetings, discussion circles or informal learning sessions:

Gender in our Work

- Preventing sexual harassment at NATO and understanding how policies translate into daily practice.
- What women want at work, and why their perspectives matter for team performance.
- Language, microaggressions and unconscious bias, and how they affect colleagues' sense of belonging.
- What does it mean to really mainstream gender at NATO, and are we achieving it?
- How gender expectations are used in marketing weaponry and shaping narratives around security.
- Experiences of men in the security and defense sectors and the links between masculinity and inequality.
- Masculinities and combatting the rise of extremism
- How will climate change affect efforts towards gender equality?
- The "Manosphere": How our online lives are changing our understanding of gender and relationships.
- Meritocracy, privilege and structural barriers.
- Gender expectations in political spaces
- Gender equality as a prerequisite in realizing the WPS Agenda (2024)

Gender and Work-life balance

- Masculinities and health-seeking behavior
- Money matters: Who makes financial decisions in our families, and how?
- Share the Care: Exploring our roles and responsibilities at home and work
- Parental leave: How do we take it, why is it important and what needs to change?
- Under the hood: men and mental well-ness
- Men's Health: More than just muscles
- Stress, pressure and anger management

Further Reading

Brussels Binder. All for One: Engaging Men as Allies, 2023. Available at: https://brusselsbinder.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2023_BB_Allyship-report.pdf

MenEngage, 2025. Available at: <https://menengage.org/>

Myrttinen, H; Lewis, C; Touquet, H. et al, Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict, and Peacebuilding, 2025.

UN Women. Handbook on Gender Mainstreaming for Gender Equality Results, 2022. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Handbook-on-gender-mainstreaming-for-gender-equality-results-en.pdf>

XY, 2025. Available online at: <https://xyonline.net/>

Attribution

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