

CASE STUDY: YMCA Europe – commit to change gender dynamics

YMCA Europe is a regional network for national YMCA organisations. It is a large NGO which seeks to advocate and represent YMCA values and interests within European Institutions and provide infrastructure support to YMCAs across Europe, with a focus on movement strengthening. Its roots lie in community education services for men and boys and consequently women were not part of the organisation for many years. Even in the 1970's women were not able to work for YMCA. The cultural and structural barriers to women's leadership were immense.



If an organisation is committed to change gender dynamics, they can do so

Today the situation has changed beyond recognition - YMCA Europe has their first woman President. The governance of YMCA Europe in the form of the Board has five women out of a total of nine Board members. The three executive leadership positions of President, Vice President and Treasurer are all women. This is the result of many years of committed culture change within the organisation.

It is no surprise that many well-established NGOs and community organisations will have a bias towards male leadership. This is the norm and is one of the reasons this resource has been developed. In order to change this bias, work needs to happen over a period of time as culture and organisational structures evolve to create a new approach to leadership and participation.

Some approaches focus on amplifying women's leadership and provide separate leadership support and courses, such as all women leadership development and mentoring programmes. The value of these is that women, as a minority group, can share experiences and develop strategies together. It is very empowering as an approach.

Other organisations favour a mixed approach where men and women are equally represented. YMCA Europe took this approach.

Their guiding principles and more recently their Safe Space statement were formally adopted by the organisation (2021) and it emphasises that all are welcome without discrimination. National and local YMCAs are able to interpret this in locally relevant and respectful ways. In some cultures, it is not so easy where values are a challenge around women's rights. They train staff to work with active YMCA principles of equality which can be a slower process with some communities and involves more negotiation.

In terms of embracing inclusive language, they are trying to find a gender-neutral collective noun for young men and women together – in Spanish and French this is fine, but not in English. It is important for them to express their values around gender rights.

This is still work in progress though; although the gender balance has increased slowly over decades with culture change at all levels, in the movement generally, executive leadership positions are mostly taken by men. In their European member associations 12 out of 28 national organisations have women CEOs. They have 2 million beneficiaries in Europe and 54% are women.

Their focus is non-formal education for children, young people and teenagers, where they prioritise equality issues, as they want more women on governance bodies in key positions. The Youth Empowerment Strategy works towards involving more women in the movement, as they have been doing for 30-40 years. There is no segregation between men and women in activities – it is seen as collective youth and a holistic approach. Their leadership training courses are also inclusive and strive for a gender balance.