

Gender Equality in Germany 2025

Statement of the Alliance of Gender Equality Officers of Non-University Research Organizations (Allianz der Gleichstellungsbeauftragten der außeruniversitären Forschungsorganisationen – AgbaF) on the involvement of Gender Equality Officers in the German scientific system

What are scientific organizations doing to advance gender equality in their institutes and facilities? The gender equality issues in science remain pressing: gender pay, care, career, pension gap, lack of transparency in recruitment procedures and lack of integration of gender aspects in research designs are still relevant and decades-old goals still remain unmet. All the more alarming are the results of a survey conducted by the Alliance of Gender Equality Officers of Non-University Research Organizations (AGbaF) on the poor involvement of Women's Representatives and Gender Equality Officers in German research organizations (survey period: end of November 2024 to mid-January 2025; mailing list: 1.000 Gender Equality Agents, 608 responses).

KEY FINDINGS

Participation in boards: Only 50% of Gender Equality Agents are involved in recruitment processes; 48% are not invited to management meetings.

Contribution: 42% feel that their expertise is not adequately considered.

Violation of the autonomy of action: 64% of the respondents do not decide for themselves on their involvement.

Lack of information: Many Gender Equality Agents have insufficient information about developments in their organizations, limiting their effectiveness and ability to act.

Weak legal foundation: Unclear policies and the lack of a right to take legal action reduce the possibilities and the influence of the Gender Equality Agents.

RECOMMENDATIONS by AGbaF

AGbaF strongly recommends the professional collaboration with the Gender Equality Agents. This includes:

- their comprehensive information and involvement in processes and procedures
- respect for their autonomy of action: Gender Equality Agents assess the gender equality relevance of a matter
- adequate financial, personnel and time resources for the offices
- strengthening legal requirements in line with the Federal Equality Act, including the introduction of a right to take legal action

Structural Anchoring

The German academic landscape de jure features a broad and detailed gender equality system that defines fields of action, assigns responsibilities and appoints stakeholders. Key players in this system at universities and research organizations are the Women's Representatives and Gender Equality Officers. Their task is to support their organizations in developing and fulfilling the gender equality goals negotiated with public funders. For this purpose, the office is equipped with various resources to support successful gender equality work. These include comprehensive and timely information on organizational procedures as well as appropriate resources (time, personnel, finances). A special resource of the role is the autonomy. Women's Representatives and Gender Equality Officers independently decide which matters are relevant to gender equality and which therefore require their support. Based on these foundations, Women's Representatives and Gender Equality Officers are able to identify and communicate where and how gender equality aspects exist and how they should be addressed to create a gender-equitable academic system.

Given this strong structure, it might come as a surprise that even after several decades of gender equality work, neither gender balance nor gender equality are taken for granted in academia. The more insight one gains into day-to-day gender equality work, the more plausible the situation becomes. In many cases the involvement of Gender Equality Agents and cooperation with them do not reflect the established standards. The results of the recent survey among Women's Representatives and Gender Equality Officers in German research organizations and universities substantiate this observation.

The survey

Between late November 2024 and mid-January 2025, around 1.000 Gender Equality Agents in German research organizations and universities were invited to participate in an online-survey conducted by AGbaf. The survey contained 14 questions on different topics: invitation to committees, flow of information, involvement in evaluation procedures and in the development of strategies and measures, consultations on sexualized discrimination and bullying as well as the respect for the autonomy of action. With 608 responses¹, the survey provides reliable data on the involvement of the Gender Equality Agents in German research organizations and universities.

Results

First, the good news: the assumption that political and societal crises as well as the rise of anti-democratic sentiments would weaken the project of equal opportunities and gender equality work in scientific organizations could not be confirmed by the survey results. On the contrary, the opposite appears true. A good half of the respondents observed any change in their involvement over the course of their term of office. Of these, 82% of those in office since before 2021 and even 90% of those in office since 2021, reported an increase – not a decrease – of their involvement (see fig. 1)².

Over 80% of Gender Equality Agents who observe a change during their term of office see an increase.

¹ 412 complete answers, 196 partial answers

² 186 of respondents in office since before 2021, 271 in office since 2021, 251 did not specify their term of office.

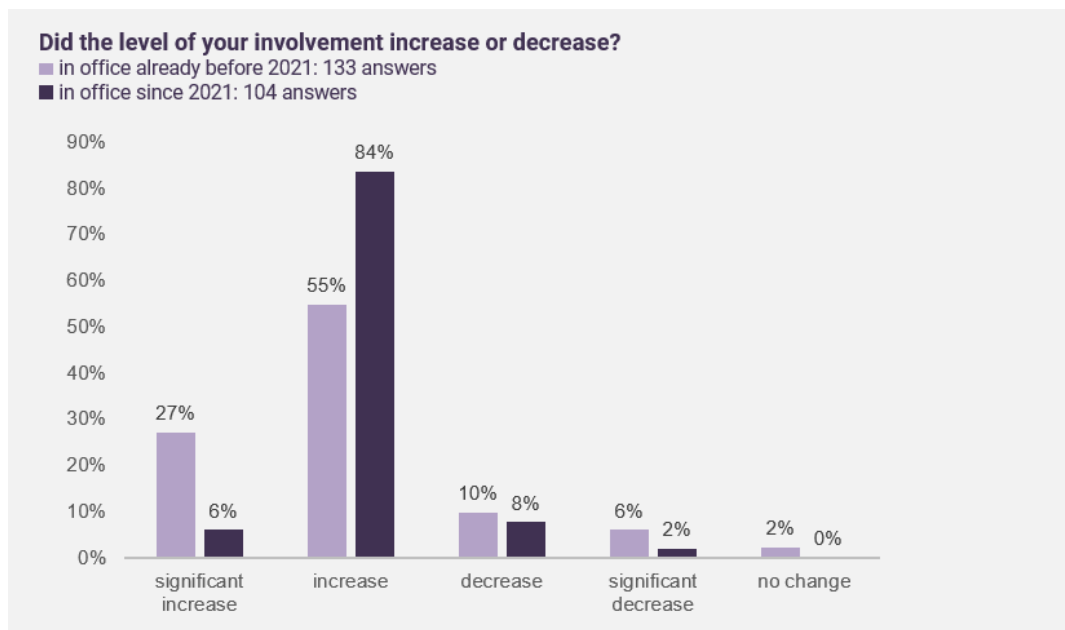


Fig. 1

However, a closer look at the realities of where and how Gender Equality Agents are involved – or excluded – raises critical questions about the actual nature and extent of this improvement.

Participation in recruitment processes and boards

A significant part of gender equality work consists of supporting recruitment processes. Especially important is the staffing of leadership positions, both for achieving quantitative gender-equality goals in the completely or largely publicly funded organizations and to ensure that those in leadership roles possess the gender competence needed in order to shape a gender-equitable and non-discriminatory work culture. Nevertheless, only half of the Gender Equality Agents are involved in the recruitment process at first, second and third management level. This applies to both the academic and research-supporting areas.

Only a good half of the Gender Equality Agents are included in recruitment procedures for management positions.

The same unsatisfactory finding applies to participation in the management meeting of the organizations: 48% of Gender Equality Agents are not invited (see fig. 2). Only just over half receive the agenda in advance and/or the minutes after the meeting.

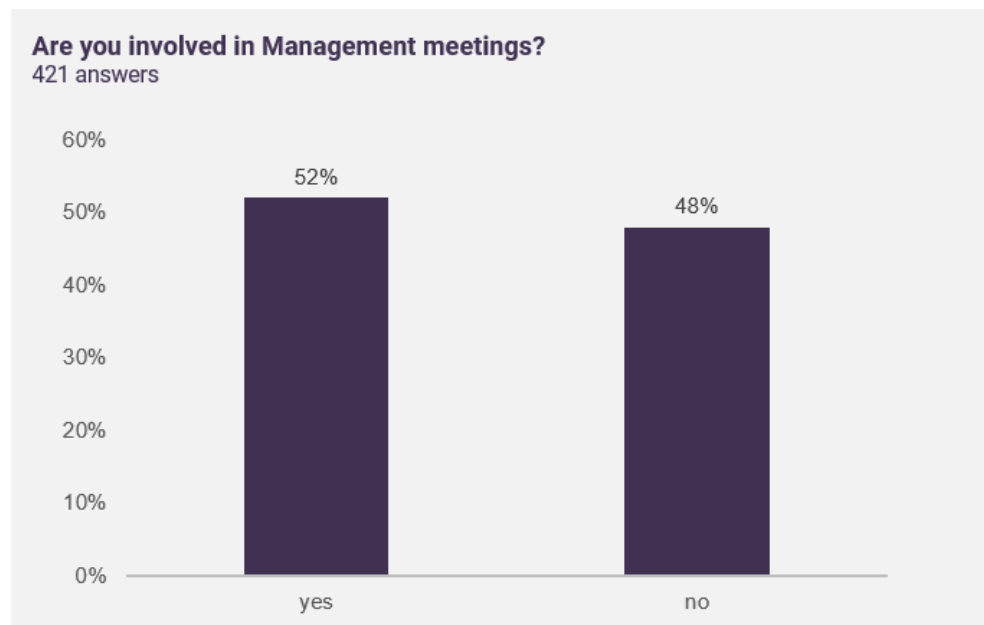


Fig. 2

Notably, 24% of respondents stated that they are not included in the diversity strategy of their organization. This is surprising, especially since 21% of Gender Equality Agents report an increasing need for counseling of individual employees on topics like “diversity”, “abuse of power” and “bullying”. A further result of the survey suggests a lack of interest in the cooperation of colleagues responsible for Gender Equality consultation: 42% of respondents stated that their expertise is generally not or insufficiently taken into account and is not included in decision-making processes (see fig. 3).

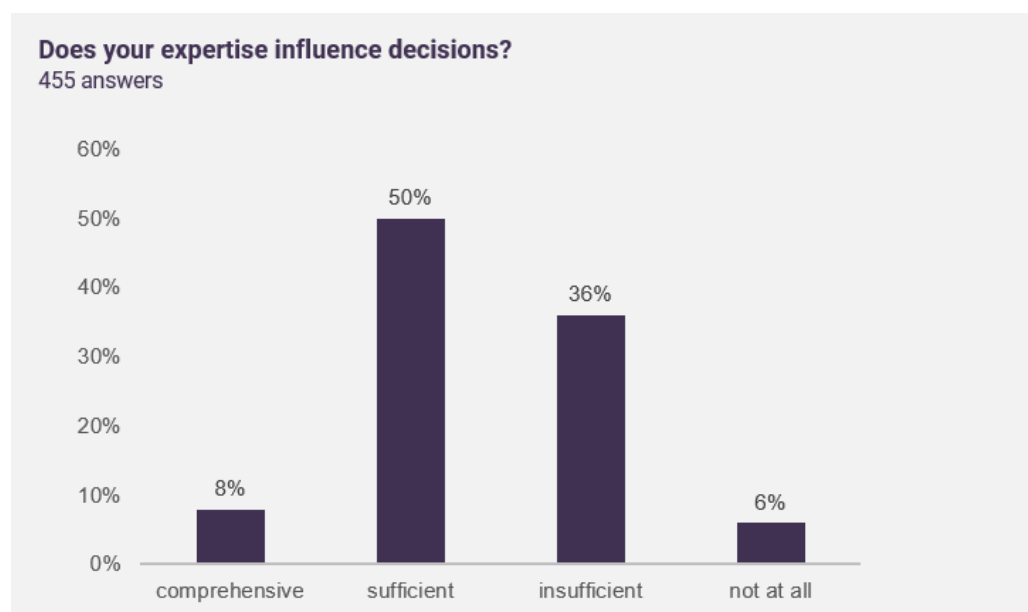


Fig. 3

Violation of the autonomy of action

Only just over a third of respondents decide for themselves – as legally mandated – in which matters, processes and procedures they are involved and to which committees they are invited. The remaining 64% reported that this decision is not theirs, meaning that their autonomy – the right to determine the gender equality relevance of a matter – is being violated³.

Almost two-thirds do not decide independently in which processes, procedures and proceedings they are involved.

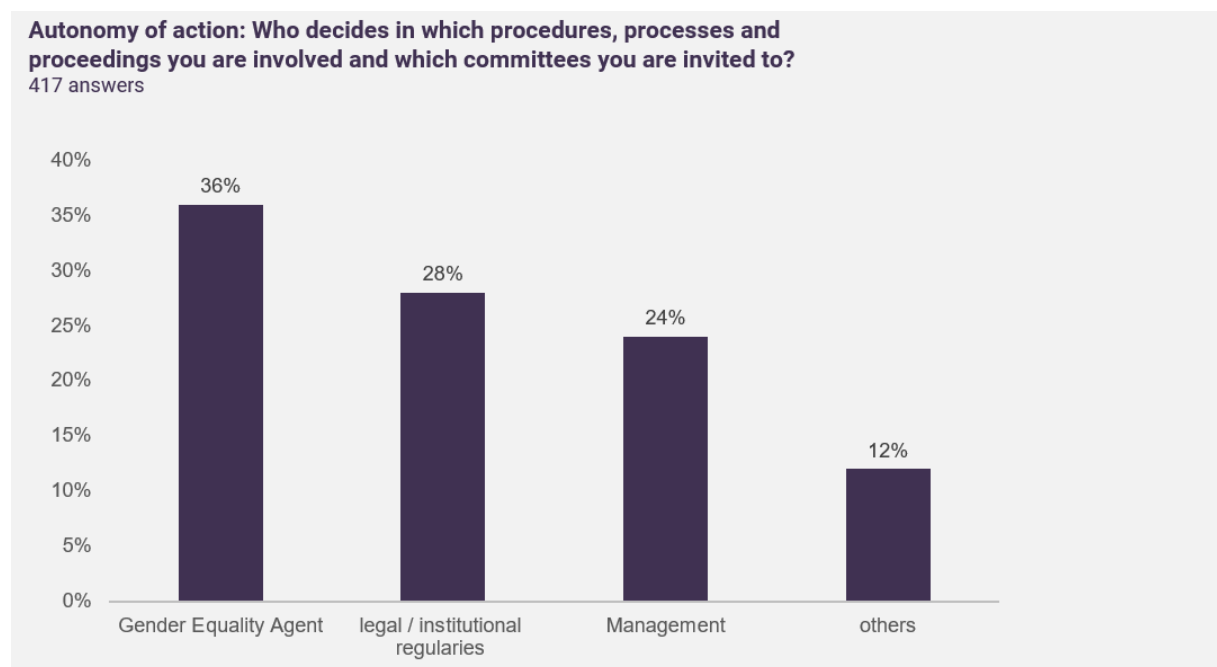


Fig. 4

The following reasons were cited as justification for such exclusions:

- denial of the gender equality relevance of the processes
- lack of responsibility of the Gender Equality Agent
- the desire to keep boards and processes lean
- The involvement of the Gender Equality Agent is not mandatory.
- confidentiality of the matter (incomprehensible given the legal duty of confidentiality of the Gender Equality Agent)
- the claim that others represent gender equality interests
- It is simply forgotten to involve the Gender Equality Agents.
- "It's never been done that way before."

³ The fact that 28% of the respondents state that their participation in procedures, processes and proceedings is regulated by legal and institutional regulations is misleading in that these regulations specifically provide for the independent decision-making of Gender Equality Agents and do not predetermine whether a matter should be accompanied by them.

Lack of information and knowledge

Due to their inadequate involvement in processes, many Gender Equality Agents lack up-to-date information and basic knowledge about their organization (see fig. 5). As a result, it is often difficult or even impossible for them to support decisions and procedures by identifying gender equality relevant aspects.

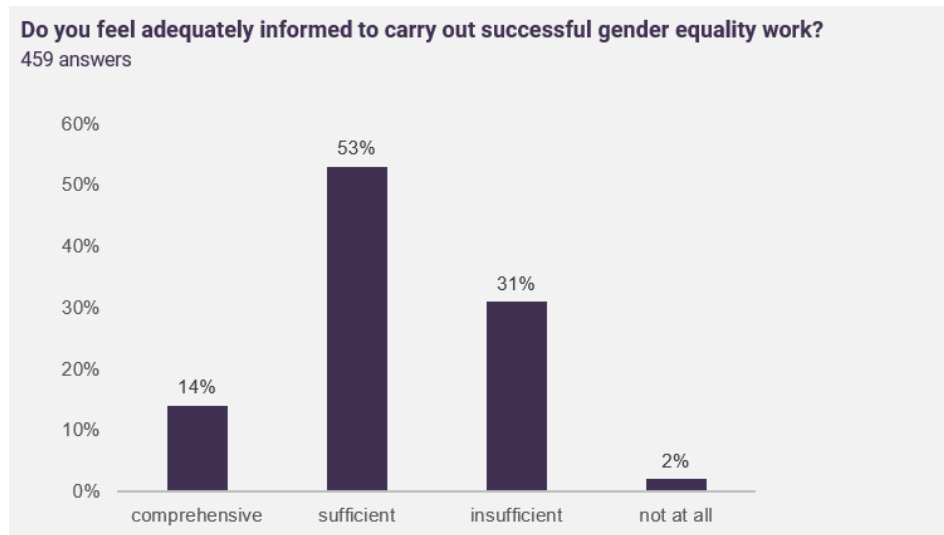


Abb. 5

It is important to note that most Gender Equality Agents perform their duties on a voluntary basis while continuing to work in their full-time position within the organization. In addition, they often do not have sufficient personnel, time and financial resources to meet the diverse and demanding requirements of the role. The short term of the electoral office, which varies by institution, makes things even more difficult. Frequent turnover every one to four years means that officeholders lack both the long-term experience with gender equality work and the time to acquire knowledge and information. As a result, they often lack sufficient expertise to act confidently and competently. One indication of the lack of essential information is the fact that only 13.5% gave an answer to the question about the external and internal regulations governing the involvement of Gender Equality Agents, and not all answers were coherent.

Weak policies and poor implementation

The picture painted by the survey is troubling. Several factors contribute to this:

- The legal foundations for the rights and responsibilities of the Gender Equality Agents are weak. In many areas, they are not sufficiently specific to guarantee information, resources and participation, instead using vague terms like “necessary resources” and “adequate release time”. Furthermore, the regulations often fall short of the standards of the Federal Equality Act. For example, in cases of non-compliance with the applicable regulations (Implementation Agreement on Gender Equality for the research organizations and the State Higher Education Act and the State Gender Equality Act for the universities), Gender Equality Agents have no right to take legal action. Objections are answered by the same leadership whose decisions are being challenged. Due to the lack of this powerful instrument – and the absence of a

The scope for action is limited by the lack of a right to take legal action for Gender Equality Agents in science.

complaints body in research organizations for the event of a violation of participation rights of the Gender Equality Agent – the influence of the Gender Equality Agents on relevant decisions in their organizations is greatly reduced⁴.

- As the survey results show, the wide scope provided by the legal frameworks for organizations in involving their Gender Equality Agents leads to a rather poor, inconsistent implementation overall. Frequently, agreed-upon guidelines are not seen as binding. Accordingly, the rights and responsibilities of the Gender Equality Agents often depend on the leadership's personal stance towards gender equality.

Given these findings, AGbaf recommends that universities and research organizations collaborate professionally with the Gender Equality Agents. The fact that gender equality still does not exist in academic environments is clearly reflected in the gender distribution across academic and non-academic positions⁵. Only when Gender Equality Agents are well-informed and equipped with sufficient financial and personnel resources, will they be able to effectively support their organizations in addressing these shortcomings. Research organizations are advised to utilize this resource and leverage its potential benefits for organizational development and research advancement. AGbaf will continue to monitor developments and hopes for visible progress in the next iteration of this survey on the involvement of the Gender Equality Officers in German research organizations and universities at the end of 2027⁶.

⁴ This is also indicated by the disbelief and pity of the colleagues whose functions are regulated by the Federal Equality Act, when they hear that there is no right to take legal action for Gender Equality Agents in science.

⁵ See materials of the GWK, booklet 91: Gleichstellungsmonitor Wissenschaft und Forschung, 28. Datenfortschreibung (2022/2023) zu Frauen in Hochschulen und außerhochschulischen Forschungseinrichtungen, Bonn 2024, ISBN 978-3-947282-27-2, https://www.gwk-bonn.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Dokumente/Papers/Heft_91_Homepage_Stand_07_10_2024.pdf.

⁶ For meaningful data and effective monitoring the AGbaf will collect the data presented in this evaluation every three years.