Women in Agriculture: Approaches to Implementing Equality Commitments

What is the problem we are trying to solve?

This research was commissioned by The Scottish Government to explore how best to bring about greater gender equality within Scottish agriculture. The Women in Agriculture Taskforce final report (2019) identified cultural barriers and gender bias within the Scottish agriculture industry and recommended the mainstreaming of an Equality Charter.

There is a lack of robust evidence about the long-term impact and effectiveness of gender equality initiatives.
The key objective was to analyse the success and impact of gender equality actions in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across industries that are comparable to agriculture.

What can we learn from case studies of gender equality initiatives in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in other industries and how can this inform the development of a gender equality initiative for Scottish agriculture?

How can the impact and success of these actions be monitored?

How can we encourage meaningful engagement with gender equality commitments and bring about sustainable changes within Scottish agriculture and its organisations?

What did we do?

An evidence review of gender equality literature that focused on identifying initiatives and evidence of their effectiveness
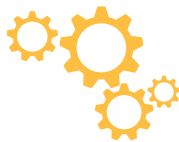
6 case studies of UK-based companies in male-dominated industries: aquaculture, construction & engineering

36 stakeholder interviews with managers and women employed in male-dominated occupations within each case study

Collected documents reviewed company policies and accessible administrative data as well as any company information in the public domain

What did we find from the evidence review?

Women face multiple barriers in joining and progressing within male-dominated industries

Businesses have different motivations for undertaking gender equality initiatives: moral, compliance-related and business case

Limited evidence that diversity (or unconscious bias) training can improve the outcome for women

Gender quotas can help focus attention on gender equality but can create doubt that women's selection is merit-based

Mentoring can reduce women's isolation in workplaces as well as small improvements in income and progression

Women's groups can reduce feelings of isolation but risk focusing on how women, rather than organisations, might change

Flexible working can address work-life balance challenges but can also impact negatively on women's career progression

Formal human resource management practices designed to deliver gender equality can help address deep-seated cultural biases and unequal practices

What did we find from the case studies?

Business case motivations were important

- Addressing labour and skill shortages
- Responding to customer expectations
- Enhancing products and services through diversity

A wide range of actions were adopted including on company values, culture and structure; recruitment and selection; flexible working; training, development and mentoring; career progression and improving the reputation of the industry through equalities actions.

A family run construction business early in their journey to advancing gender equality

At the recruitment stage there is now a greater focus on core values, looking for the right attitude and willingness to learn as opposed to just technical experience.

This may be positive in attracting women into non-traditional jobs.

An employee-owned aquaculture business that focuses on fairness for everyone

The business is making changes to flexible working to address some of the skills shortages - creating a more flexible shift system that gives people options to work in ways that suit them and introducing more part-time or job sharing options rather than only a 20 hours per week contract.

This will support the needs of a wider talent pool, including women returners.

An engineering design consultancy that has grown rapidly, promoting diversity in a subtle way

Leading the way in challenging industry norms by introducing alternative networking events. In response to events that typically take place in the evening over drinks, the business has started to host breakfast and lunch events.

This change in networking makes the events more accessible for employees with caring responsibilities.

Successful implementation required senior leadership commitment; clear accountability for equalities actions' engaging the workforce, especially women; developing training and communications around equalities issues and working with other supportive organisations.

A family owned engineering business with an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) agenda driven by the leadership team

The business set up a Working Group which is led by HR and includes 9 individuals that represent all areas and levels of the organisation. This group meets every 3 months to share ideas and develop their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) approach, refine the strategy document, create mini action plans and ensure that messages land well.

Not all equalities actions are systematically monitored, with some being recent origin, but reviewing equalities data was a feature in many of the businesses, as was feedback on the outcomes of monitoring.

An engineering business that promotes the industry to all

Employees are encouraged to take part in the UK wide STEM ambassadors programme and are permitted to take some time out of work in order to do this.

STEM ambassadors go into schools, colleges, universities and careers fairs promoting work opportunities in engineering.

A geotechnical engineering business that has always maintained a near even gender balance

Employees participate in the Investors in People (IiP) survey and the Women into Science and Engineering (WISE) 10 steps metric survey. Employee data by gender is recorded, monitored annually and information is shared regularly at senior management meetings and team away days.

Monitoring and reporting ensure that gender equality remains embedded in the company culture.

Businesses faced a number of challenges in evaluating the impact and effectiveness of their equalities actions but could point to improvements in gender balance and to more equality-proofed processes.

What did we conclude?

- The benefits of adopting an inclusive approach where gender equality is everyone's responsibility but especially for key organisational decision-makers.

- The need for clear accountability for delivering and overseeing better equality outcomes and active enforcement of gender equality initiatives.

- The importance of ensuring that gender equality is embedded in the formal and informal values of the organisation. Implementing standalone initiatives that do not align with the existing culture is unlikely to have the desired effect.

- The benefits of focusing on transparency and fairness in the design and implementation of HR policies and practices that explicitly recognise the need to enhance gender equality in specific organisational contexts.

- The need to measure outcomes and impact. Well thought-out monitoring and evaluation practices are an important component of success in this area.

- The importance of encouraging meaningful engagement with gender equality commitments by focusing on challenging or problematic cultures, behaviours and practices rather than trying to change women to fit within these problematic cultures.

What did we recommend?

Industry-based organisations and Scottish Government should work together to increase awareness, support and networking in agriculture and help businesses to access expertise and guidance.

Businesses should improve their knowledge and understanding of equalities issues; build internal support for change; identify priority actions; collaborate with staff on implementation; and build measurement of outcomes and impact into ongoing learning.

Individuals should adopt a view that equality is everyone's business and engage with their employers in advancing equality outcomes where possible.

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