



FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND THE PROMOTION OF GENDER EQUALITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Agenda of legitimacy, effectiveness and innovation



Credit: Office of the Attorney General of the MPTCU.

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TCU's program to prevent and combat workplace harassment. Her life trajectory, marked by resilience in the face of adversity, guides her professional path toward building a more just and equitable society. She is a frequent presence at gender-related events, participating in initiatives that advance the rights and empowerment of women.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 2025, the world marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – a global action plan adopted in 1995 to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. UN Women, the United Nations programme dedicated to this agenda, works to turn the commitments made in Beijing into reality, monitoring countries' progress, advocating for gender equality, and encouraging the implementation of the established guidelines. By defining 12 critical areas and adopting a monitoring method based on goals and indicators, the Platform for Action introduced a new paradigm: treating this important agenda not as a promise, but as a measurable institutional process, integrated into the planning and evaluation of public policies (UNDP, 2021; IDB, 2022).

This milestone reflects the contemporary notion of inclusive public governance, grounded in evidence and transparency. Beijing anticipated the modern logic of good governance and social accountability by proposing comparable indicators and periodic reporting on the effectiveness of gender-related policies (UN Women, 2025; Brazil, 2018).

Since then, the agenda has ceased to be isolated and has come to inform discussions on sustainable development, governance, and innovation in the public sector. Countries and international organizations have adopted gender equality as a cross-cutting pillar of strategic planning, expanding data production, diagnostic studies, and results measurement (IDB, 2022; Timóteo, 2022). This incorporation of metrics and targets strengthens the legitimacy of public policy by making the commitment to equity a verifiable component of state performance (UNDP, 2021).

However, the assessment after 30 years of Beijing shows that the transformation remains ongoing and incomplete. Inequalities persist, particularly in positions of power and decision-making. Progress varies across countries and sectors, and cultural resistance to redistributing power between genders remains a significant obstacle (UN Women, 2025; IDI, 2024).

In this context, the new generation of equity policies must combine institutional change with cultural transformation, linking accountability mechanisms with education and social awareness (Olacefs, 2021; Timóteo, 2022).



2 MAINSTREAMING AND INTERSECTIONALITY: TWO KEY APPROACHES TO GENDER EQUALITY

The 2030 Agenda – adopted by the UN in 2015 as a roadmap for sustainable development – establishes, among its objectives, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (UNDP, 2021, p. 10).

SDG 5 is comprehensive and cuts across the entire 2030 Agenda. This means that every policy – whether in health, infrastructure, budgeting, or education – must be planned and evaluated with attention to its distinctive impacts on women and men. Mainstreaming stands in opposition to treating equality as a sectoral topic: it places gender at the core of state action and requires institutional capacity to collect disaggregated data, establish targets, and monitor results (UN Women, 2025). Yet mainstreaming alone, without an intersectional perspective, is insufficient.

Gender equality does not manifest uniformly: it is shaped by race, class, territory, age, disability, and gender identity. An intersectional approach reveals how these factors overlap, guiding policy design so that it responds more precisely to different realities and vulnerabilities (IDB, 2022).

Mainstreaming requires that managers be trained to incorporate a gender perspective at all stages of the public policy cycle – from diagnosis and formulation to implementation and evaluation – ensuring that equity guides public management at all levels (UN Women, 2025; UNDP, 2021). This requires gender-responsive planning and budgeting tools, as well as impact indicators that reflect real differences in the living conditions of women and men, ensuring effective measurement of results (IDB, 2022; Brazil, 2018). Institutions adopting this approach enhance their analytical capacity, reduce the risk of ineffective or exclusionary policies, and strengthen the legitimacy of decision-making (Timóteo, 2022).

Intersectionality, in turn, broadens the State’s understanding of accumulated inequalities. By recognizing that gender, race, and class interact structurally, public management acknowledges that exclusion is multifaceted and that solutions must be equally complex and coordinated (IDB, 2022; UN Women, 2025). Applying this lens means valuing context-specific knowledge, listening to women in all their diversity, and adapting policies to different regional and social contexts (UNDP, 2021; Brazil, 2018). This practice strengthens distributive justice and amplifies the transformative impact of public action, fostering a more inclusive State sensitive to historical inequalities (Timóteo, 2022).

3 WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REPRESENTATION, INFLUENCE, AND PUBLIC VALUE

In Brazil, according to the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD Contínua) (Brazil, 2020), women make up 57.8% of the public workforce, but their participation drops sharply at decision-making and senior management levels. This pattern is confirmed by the findings of TCU Ruling 635/2025 (Brazil, 2025). The audit concluded that women hold only 41.5% of leadership positions – a disparity that widens significantly when race is considered, Black women occupy just 3.3% of the highest federal positions (DAS Level 6), compared to 70.9% held by white men.



Raising women into leadership is not simply about ensuring symbolic presence but enabling real influence over policy formulation and implementation. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (2022) demonstrates a positive correlation between higher female participation in public decisions and economic growth, reduced inequalities, and greater social investment in health and education. Women in leadership shed light on experiences and priorities previously marginalized. Moreover, research on inclusive public administration confirms that diverse organizations make more legitimate decisions and produce more effective policies (Brazil, 2018).

Promoting women into leadership also has powerful educational and symbolic effects. When a woman occupies a position of power, the prospect of access expands for others, who feel encouraged to pursue similar roles, especially in historically male-dominated fields (UN Women, 2025; IDB, 2022).

Women's presence in decision-making roles challenges stereotypes, diversifies management styles, and introduces innovative perspectives on power, conflict mediation, and consensus-building (Brazil, 2018; Timóteo, 2022). The public value generated by diversity is both ethical and pragmatic (UNDP, 2021).

Furthermore, female leadership has contributed to redefining the concept of public authority, bringing it closer to values such as empathy, active listening, and collaboration (IDB, 2022; UN Women, 2025). Far from signifying weakness, these qualities represent strategic competencies for contemporary governance, which demands systemic vision and the ability to build shared solutions (Brazil, 2018; UNDP, 2021). Investing in gender equity is investing in the quality of public service and the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Timóteo, 2022; Olacefs, 2021).

However, increasing female representation in decision-making bodies cannot rely solely – nor always – on political will. Ensuring that women reach and remain in leadership positions requires actions to combat harassment and discrimination, revealing the need for a broader and more complex institutional effort to consolidate diversity and inclusion in positions of power.

4 LEADING BY EXAMPLE: COHERENCE AND LEGITIMACY IN SUPREME AUDIT INSTITUTIONS (SAIs)

Government audit activities operate within a management structure that combines oversight functions with the duty to promote good administrative practices. This dual role requires SAIs to serve as a reference for other public institutions as well as for citizens. Public trust depends not only on how effectively SAIs perform their legally assigned oversight functions but also on the internal management processes and policies that guide the conduct of their staff and decision-making bodies.

To guide SAI performance and considering the challenge of strengthening confidence in their mission, regulations, and standards, these institutions adopt values that should shape their actions. Such values apply both to external oversight and to internal management. In this context, gender equality and diversity policies play an essential role.



The International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions' INTOSAI-P 2 (INTOSAI, 2013) enshrines the principle of leading by example. SAIs must be model organizations, practicing internally the ethics, transparency, and good governance they demand from others (INTOSAI, 2013). The INTOSAI Development Initiative (IDI, 2024) reinforces that gender equality should be integrated into SAIs' management and decision-making routines. In Latin America, the Organization of Latin American and Caribbean Supreme Audit Institutions (OLACEFS, 2021) developed a gender equality and non-discrimination policy, including an implementation guide and indicators (Timóteo, 2022).

Leading by example means recognizing that good governance begins at home. Courts of Audit that apply internally the same practices they evaluate externally strengthen both their technical authority and democratic legitimacy.

By adopting internal equity policies, these institutions not only reinforce the coherence of their message but also increase their influence on the wider public administration. A court committed to gender parity, diversity, and inclusion sends a clear message that good governance is inseparable from respect for human rights and equal opportunities.

This institutional coherence also impacts organizational culture. Diverse environments are more creative, collaborative, and resilient. The presence of women in strategic positions within SAIs enriches audit processes and the evaluation of public accounts by incorporating new perspectives, resulting in decisions more attuned to social realities. Leading by example is therefore a demonstration of institutional integrity and public pedagogy.

5 EQUALITY: THE UNDP SEAL AND THE ROLE OF AUDITS

Embedding gender-responsive governance within organizations requires structured processes and verifiable indicators. The Gender Equality Seal for Public Institutions, developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is an internationally recognized evidence-based management model (UNDP, 2021). Its methodology adopts a continuous improvement cycle – engagement, diagnosis, action plan, implementation, and assessment – supported by comparable indicators and results-oriented monitoring.

By adopting methodologies such as the UNDP Seal and guidelines from INTOSAI and OLACEFS, the TCU positions itself as a leader among federal institutions in promoting gender equality across the public sector.

Institutionalizing gender policy also requires thematic audits and impact assessments (INTOSAI, 2013; IDI, 2024). When government audit incorporates a gender perspective, it strengthens its social role and contributes to improving public policies in sensitive areas such as health, education, and labor (OLACEFS, 2021; Timóteo, 2022). Performance audits with this approach generate valuable knowledge, guide leadership, and bolster democratic accountability by exposing inequalities long treated as natural (UNDP, 2021; UN Women, 2025).



Additionally, a commitment to equality must be reflected in human resources management tools, procurement processes, training programs, and institutional communication (Brazil, 2018; IDB, 2022). Internal equity policies are not only a matter of justice but also of efficiency: they reduce staff turnover, increase engagement, and foster healthier, more productive work environments (UNDP, 2021; Timóteo, 2022). When the State is structured around non-discriminatory principles, it becomes more trustworthy and capable of generating sustainable public value (INTOSAI, 2013; IDI, 2024).

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Three decades after Beijing, gender equality has become not only an ethical ideal but also an indicator of institutional maturity. Governments and audit institutions that integrate this perspective into their structures and decisions deliver better outcomes and strengthen social trust (UN Women, 2025; Timóteo, 2022). Mainstreaming requires gender equality to permeate all stages of public action, while intersectionality ensures that no woman is rendered invisible because of her background, race, or territory. Women's leadership is a governance strategy that improves diagnostics, drives innovation, and strengthens democratic legitimacy. Promoting gender equality is governing with efficiency, justice, and humanity – an imperative of the government and a commitment to future generations.

This policy extends beyond occupying positions of power, it involves redefining institutional practices and approaches to authority (IDB, 2022; Brazil, 2018). Women who lead the formulation, implementation, and oversight of public action bring a more inclusive, participatory, and empathetic vision to governance, strengthening the relationship between State and society. Female leadership transforms structures, challenges cultural norms, and creates decision-making standards in which care and efficiency are not opposing values but complementary and strategic (UN Women, 2025; UNDP, 2021).

Moreover, leadership exercised by women has a multiplying effect: it inspires others, renews decision-making arenas, and generates social impact beyond institutional boundaries (OLACEFS, 2021; Timóteo, 2022). By bringing women into decision-making positions, the public sector broadens the diversity of perspectives and enriches governance processes, making them more sensitive to the realities of the population. This is not only a matter of historical justice – it is organizational intelligence. Where there is diversity, there is innovation; where women lead, there is more representation, legitimacy, dialogue, and, ultimately, greater public trust (INTOSAI, 2013; IDI, 2024).

Advancing gender equality is therefore not a mere administrative guideline. It is a call to build a new era in public service. Strengthening women's leadership in oversight, decision-making, and policy formulation is not only a requirement of efficiency and justice, but also a gesture of confidence in the transformative power of women. Every space gained and every voice heard broadens the horizon of a more sensitive, innovative, and people-centered State. Promoting women to leadership, opening pathways for their full participation, and incorporating a gender lens into management practices are steps along the same journey – a pathway toward a more just, diverse, and profoundly humane model of governance.



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