

Gender-Sensitive HR Toolkit for Cybersecurity Organisations

Supporting fair, inclusive, and resilient
cybersecurity workplaces



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List of Acronyms

HR	Human Resources
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
ISC2	International Information System Security Certification Consortium
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
EU	European Union
ENISA	European Union Agency for Cybersecurity
Gen Z	Generation Z
KPI	Key Performance Indicator

Introduction

Cybersecurity is one of the fastest-growing and strategically critical sectors globally, yet organizations, including those in the Western Balkans, continue to face significant workforce and skills shortages. According to the [ISC2 2025 Cybersecurity Workforce Study](#), around 33% of organizations report insufficient financial resources to adequately staff cybersecurity teams, while 29% cannot afford to hire professionals with the necessary skills. Workforce shortages directly affect organizational security, with 72% of respondents stating that reducing cybersecurity staff significantly increases the risk of a cyber breach. Beyond staffing numbers, 95% of cybersecurity professionals reported at least one significant skills gap within their teams, and 59% identified critical or major shortages in specific competencies. These gaps have tangible consequences: 88% of organizations experienced at least one cybersecurity incident or operational problem due to missing skills, and 69% reported multiple such impacts.

At the same time, the cybersecurity sector continues to face a significant gender imbalance. Women represent approximately 24–25% of the global cybersecurity workforce, with participation

dropping to around 10–15% in executive and decision-making roles (ISC2, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024). Within the European Union, women account for around 20% of ICT specialists, with even lower representation in cybersecurity-specific and leadership roles (Eurostat, 2023; European Commission, 2022). In the Western Balkans, while comprehensive cybersecurity-specific data remains limited, available ICT workforce statistics indicate similar or slightly lower participation rates of women, particularly in technical and senior positions.

This underrepresentation is not due to a lack of qualifications: women in cybersecurity are as likely as—or more likely than—men to hold advanced degrees and professional certifications (ISC2, 2023). However, for cybersecurity organizations, this gap has direct operational and strategic implications. Diverse teams are consistently shown to outperform less diverse ones in problem-solving, risk identification, and innovation—capabilities that are critical in a field defined by rapidly evolving and complex threats (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Harvard Business Review, 2018). A lack of gender diversity can therefore limit an organization's ability to anticipate and respond to cybersecurity risks effectively, while also narrowing the available talent pool amid persistent global and European workforce shortages (European Union Agency for Cybersecurity, 2023).

The persistence of this imbalance is primarily driven by structural and organizational barriers across recruitment, retention, and promotion. These include biased hiring practices, gendered role expectations, opaque evaluation systems, limited access to leadership pathways, exclusionary workplace cultures, and insufficient

mechanisms for reporting discrimination or harassment. Addressing these barriers is not only a matter of equity but a strategic priority for organizations seeking to strengthen resilience, improve performance, and remain competitive in an increasingly complex cybersecurity landscape.

Human Resources functions play a critical role in addressing these challenges. HR policies, procedures, and day-to-day decision-making processes directly influence who enters the organisation, how talent is assessed and developed, whether employees feel supported and protected, and who remains and advances over time.

The term “HR” is used broadly in this toolkit. In large companies, it may refer to formal HR departments. In small companies or startups, it may refer to founders, managers, legal staff responsible for contracts, or anyone responsible for people management.

This Toolkit was developed within the scope of **Her Cyber: Empowering Women and Girls in Cyber (CybHER) project**, funded by the UK Government, and is informed by six two-day Gender-Sensitive HR Policies workshops delivered across the Western Balkans.

It incorporates practical reflections and lessons learned from these workshops, as well as international good practice. It is intended for HR professionals, line managers, and organisational leaders working in cybersecurity and technology-driven organisations, to support fair, inclusive, and resilient cybersecurity workplaces.

It is designed as a practical support tool, rather than a policy document. Organisations may use the Toolkit as a reference guide, as support for internal discussions, or when reviewing and updating HR policies and practices. Each section explains key concepts and highlights common challenges, followed by practice examples and tools. The annexes provide checklists, templates, and reflection tools that can be used independently or together, depending on organisational needs and capacity. Organisations are encouraged to adapt the tools to their own context and to focus on progress over time, rather than immediate full implementation.

The Toolkit therefore aims to:

- /// identify gender-related barriers across all aspects of organisational culture
- /// support equal, diverse, inclusive, and gender sensitive recruitment and job design
- /// promote fair career progression and leadership opportunities
- /// strengthen organisational culture and safe reporting mechanisms
- /// provide practical tools that organisations of different sizes can apply.

Each section contains:

- /// explanation of the issue
- /// real-life inspired practice example
- /// maturity framework (minimum vs advanced standards)
- /// practical steps organisations can implement.

Understanding and using the Maturity Framework

A maturity framework is a structured tool that helps organisations assess their current capabilities, identify gaps, and plan improvements systematically. It provides a clear roadmap outlining the minimum standards an organisation should meet, as well as advanced standards that represent best practices or aspirational goals.

Using maturity framework can help your organisation evaluate its existing processes and procedures:

- /// Understand the baseline expectations (minimum standard) for each dimension of your work.
- /// Identify areas where your organization is performing well and areas that require improvement.
- /// Plan actions to progressively move from minimum standards towards advanced practices.
- /// Establish measurable targets, prioritize improvements, and track progress over time.

In practice, each dimension of the framework outlines concrete criteria, and recommended actions help you align your procedures with both minimum and advanced standards. This approach ensures a structured, transparent, and continuous improvement process.

Examples included in the Toolkit are illustrative and anonymised. They are intended to support reflection and learning rather than to assess individual organisations or prescribe a single approach.

The Toolkit can be used as a reference document, as support for internal HR discussions, or as a practical guide when reviewing or updating HR policies and practices.

Ethical Organisational Culture and Values

What Shapes Organisational Culture in Cybersecurity Organisations

Organisational culture refers to the shared values, norms, behaviours, and everyday practices that shape how people work, communicate, and make decisions within an organisation (Schein, 2017)¹. Shared values represent the principles and beliefs that guide employees' actions, while shared behaviours reflect the consistent ways in which these values are expressed in day-to-day work (Cameron & Quinn, 2011)².

Organisational culture is relevant for any business because it influences employee engagement, collaboration, decision-making, and overall performance (Denison, 1990)³. A strong, positive culture supports ethical conduct, transparency, and accountability, helping organisations build trust with employees, cus-

tomers, and stakeholders (Treviño & Nelson, 2017)⁴. Building an ethical business model, where values and behaviours align with both legal standards and moral principles, enables companies to thrive by fostering sustainable growth, innovation, and long-term resilience (Treviño & Nelson, 2017; Denison, 1990).

In cybersecurity organisations across the Western Balkans, organisational culture is shaped by high-pressure operational environments, incident-driven workflows, and pronounced technical hierarchies, as highlighted in regional surveys and stakeholder consultations. While these characteristics are typical of the sector globally, in the Western Balkan context, they are often intensified by smaller team structures, limited access to continuous training, and still-developing digital infrastructures. This combination can increase workload pressure and reduce opportunities for structured career development.

In such environments, organisational practices that are not explicitly designed to be inclusive may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities, particularly affecting women and other underrepresented groups. Barriers may emerge through informal decision-making processes, limited transparency in performance evaluation, and restricted access to leadership pathways.

Human Resources functions, therefore, play a pivotal role in mitigating these risks. By embedding structured, transparent, and inclusive people-management practices, such as clear evaluation criteria, equitable access to training, and mechanisms that support

- 1 Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017).
- 2 Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).
- 3 Daniel R. Denison, *Corporate Culture and Organizational Effectiveness* (New York: Wiley, 1990).

- 4 Linda K. Treviño and Katherine A. Nelson, *Managing Business Ethics: Straight Talk About How to Do It Right*, 7th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017).

psychological safety, HR can help translate organisational values into everyday practice. Evidence shows that such approaches contribute to improved employee retention, higher engagement, and more inclusive workplace cultures, particularly for underrepresented groups (Gallup, 2023; McKinsey & Company, 2020; Deloitte, 2021; Edmondson, 2018).

How Culture Shows Up in Practice

Organisational culture is difficult to measure directly, but it leaves observable traces in how people behave, participate, and progress. Measuring culture is important because it reveals whether organisational values and policies are truly reflected in daily practice, and highlights gaps that may limit inclusion, fairness, and employee engagement. Without measurement, organisations risk assuming that formal rules and policies are effective when, in reality, employees may not feel safe or supported to use them.

Quantitative indicators may include:

- // employee retention rates, disaggregated by gender and caregiving status (e.g., women, parents, caregivers);
- // utilisation of flexible work arrangements, such as remote or hybrid work, parental and caregiving leave, return-to-work programmes after parental leave, mentorship and sponsorship programmes, and employee assistance or well-being support services;
- // representation of women in leadership and decision-making roles;
- // application rates for internal career advancement opportunities (e.g., promotions, leadership roles, project leads), disag-

gregated by gender, as well as participation in performance evaluations and feedback processes.

Qualitative indicators may include:

- // results of employee satisfaction and psychological safety surveys;
- // employee narratives and perceptions (“what it feels like to work here”);
- // communication styles and dynamics in meetings and team interactions;
- // levels of trust in reporting, complaint, and protection mechanisms.

Analysing these data points together provides insight into the actual organisational climate. For example, if uptake of flexible work or support programmes is low among certain groups, or if fewer women apply for internal advancement opportunities, this may indicate underlying cultural or structural barriers. Such insights enable organisations to take targeted, practical steps to address gaps and strengthen an inclusive and supportive workplace culture.

Practical Action Points

- // Review retention and promotion data by gender, department, and role. Where are the gaps?
- // Examine the usage of flexible work policies. Are employees actually able to benefit?
- // Discuss culture and employee experience in your next strategic meeting. Ask directly what helps or hinders participation and inclusion.

- Conduct brief focus groups or surveys to gather employee narratives on teamwork, decision-making, and psychological safety.
- Use findings to adjust policies, communication, and HR practices, ensuring that organisational values are translated into lived experience.

Signals of Inclusion and Exclusion in Everyday Work

Employees primarily experience organisational culture through everyday interactions rather than formal statements. Inclusion or exclusion is often communicated through small but repeated signals, such as:

- whose contributions are acknowledged in meetings;
- how mistakes, learning, and uncertainty are discussed;
- who is trusted with complex, visible, or high-impact tasks;
- how requests for flexibility are perceived and handled;
- how concerns, disagreements, or alternative views are received.

In fast-paced cybersecurity teams, where operational speed and technical urgency dominate, informal norms can quickly become entrenched. If not intentionally reflected upon, these norms may override formal commitments to equality and inclusion, determining who gets visibility, career opportunities, and recognition—often without conscious bias on the part of managers. Evidence from regional cybersecurity organisations shows that women and employees with caregiving responsibilities are disproportionately affected when informal practices conflict with official policies (ISC2, 2025; RCC, 2025).

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Culture Definition	Values exist informally but are not clearly defined or consistently communicated	Organisational values are formally defined, documented, and communicated across teams	Define and formally communicate organisational values and expected behaviours
Inclusion Awareness	Limited awareness of inclusion and diversity concepts	Inclusion is recognised as a strategic priority	Introduce organisation-wide inclusion and DEI awareness programmes
Behavioural Norms	Behaviour depends on individuals, not systems	Inclusive behaviours are encouraged and partially embedded in policies	Embed inclusive behaviours into codes of conduct and internal policies
Measurement	No systematic measurement of culture	Periodic employee surveys and feedback mechanisms exist	Establish regular measurement of employee experience and psychological safety
Continuous Improvement	No structured improvement processes	Some actions taken based on feedback	Establish continuous feedback loops and integrate insights into decision-making

Example: Informal Norms and Participation

Scenario: In several cybersecurity teams in the Western Balkans, recurring team meetings are scheduled early in the morning or late in the evening to accommodate urgent operational tasks. While framed as “necessary for efficiency,” this practice consistently excludes employees with caregiving responsibilities or who face commuting challenges from participating in key discussions.

Impact:

- Reduced visibility of excluded employees in decision-making.
- Fewer opportunities to lead high-impact tasks.
- Perception of lower commitment affects performance reviews and promotions.

What company can do:

- Map all recurring meetings and check who consistently attends versus who is absent.
- Survey employees to understand barriers to participation.
- Adjust meeting schedules or rotate times to ensure inclusion without compromising operational needs.
- Encourage managers to explicitly recognize contributions from those who may not always be physically present.
- Review team norms quarterly to ensure alignment with organisational commitments to fairness and inclusion.

Key takeaway: Small, informal practices shape organisational culture every day. By identifying and addressing exclusionary norms, organisations can uphold their formal equality commitments while maintaining operational efficiency.

The Role of Leadership, Line Managers, and HR

Leadership behaviour is a key driver of organisational culture. Line managers translate organisational values into everyday practice by allocating tasks fairly, giving constructive feedback, addressing employee concerns, and implementing HR policies consistently. By leading inclusively and embedding equitable practices into daily management, line managers ensure that HR initiatives strengthen a positive and supportive workplace culture.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Fair Task Allocation	Tasks are assigned based on availability or informal preferences; potential for inequity exists.	Tasks and responsibilities are allocated transparently, considering skills, development goals, and equitable opportunities.	Map task allocation; track assignments by gender/level; rotate high-visibility or leadership tasks; document rationale for key decisions.
Constructive Feedback	Feedback may be inconsistent or focused only on immediate performance; unconscious bias may influence language.	Managers provide regular, structured, and bias-aware feedback that supports growth and inclusivity.	Standardise feedback frameworks; train managers on inclusive language and bias mitigation; schedule routine check-ins.
Addressing Employee Concerns	Employee concerns may be handled ad hoc; some voices may be overlooked or dismissed.	Managers respond promptly and respectfully to concerns, fostering trust and psychological safety.	Define reporting channels; train managers on sensitive issue handling; document concerns and resolutions for accountability.
Implementation of HR Policies	HR policies exist but are inconsistently applied; managers may interpret them subjectively.	HR policies are consistently applied and reinforced through daily management practices; alignment with organisational values is clear.	Provide managers with policy guidance and toolkits; audit policy adherence; integrate policy application into leadership KPIs.
Inclusive Leadership Practice	Leadership may not explicitly consider diversity or equitable opportunities in decision-making.	Leaders actively model inclusivity, reinforce fairness, and embed equitable practices into daily operations.	Include inclusive leadership metrics in performance reviews; mentor managers on equitable practices; celebrate diverse contributions publicly.

Example: Making Your Organisational Culture Gender-Sensitive

Scenario: In a regional IT support team, all innovation and process-improvement meetings are led by senior technical staff and are mostly scheduled in executive-only forums. Junior or mid-level employees, despite having practical insights and suggestions, are rarely invited or consulted. While this practice is framed as efficiency and “decision-making by experience,” it systematically excludes employees from lower job grades, limiting their visibility and input in shaping team processes.

Impact:

- Valuable perspectives and practical ideas from junior or mid-level staff are overlooked.
- Employees feel disengaged and perceive limited career progression opportunities.
- Leadership development is concentrated among senior staff, reinforcing hierarchical barriers.

What company can do:

- Map meeting invitations and participation by job grade to identify underrepresented groups.
- Include junior and mid-level staff in relevant strategy and process improvement discussions.
- Implement structured channels (e.g., suggestion boards, rotational presentation slots) for all employees to contribute ideas.
- Encourage managers to mentor and recognize contribu-

tions from non-senior employees publicly.

- Review participation metrics quarterly to ensure inclusivity across job levels.

Key takeaway:

Exclusion is not limited to gender or caregiving responsibilities. Hierarchical or job-grade structures can unintentionally silence valuable voices. By actively including all levels of staff in key discussions, organisations strengthen engagement, innovation, and equitable career development.

From Values to Practice

Organisational values shape culture only when they are reflected in everyday decisions and behaviours. When values remain abstract or disconnected from practice, they risk being perceived as symbolic rather than meaningful. Aligning values with practice is particularly important in cybersecurity environments, where complex, high-pressure situations require consistent reference points for decision-making, trust, psychological safety, and accountability.

If values are not actively applied, inclusion and fairness largely depend on individual managers’ or HR staff’s personal awareness. This creates variability, reduces trust, and risks that policies are not experienced as intended. Organisations need to systematically translate values into concrete practices, monitor adherence, and address behaviours that contradict stated values.

Practical actions to align values with practice:

- Integrate organisational values into recruitment, promotion, and role design criteria, not only in external communications.
- Explicitly reference values in performance feedback, leadership development, and team meetings.
- Address behaviours that contradict values promptly, regardless of seniority or technical expertise.
- Regularly review informal norms and practices to identify unintended impacts on inclusion and participation.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Culture definition	Values exist informally but are not clearly defined or consistently communicated	Organisational values are formally defined, documented, and communicated across teams	Define and formally communicate organisational values and expected behaviours
Inclusion awareness	Limited awareness of inclusion and diversity concepts	Inclusion is recognised as a strategic priority	Introduce organisation-wide inclusion and DEI awareness programmes
Behavioural norms	Behaviour depends on individuals, not systems	Inclusive behaviours are encouraged and partially embedded in policies	Embed inclusive behaviours into codes of conduct and internal policies
Measurement	No systematic measurement of culture	Periodic employee surveys and feedback mechanisms exist	Establish regular measurement of employee experience and psychological safety
Continuous improvement	No structured improvement processes	Some actions taken based on feedback	Establish continuous feedback loops and integrate insights into decision-making

Practical Action Points:

- Conduct a self-assessment to determine whether your organisation meets the minimum or advanced standard.
- Identify gaps and prioritise improvements: e.g., integrate values into recruitment, performance feedback, and leadership development; address behaviours that contradict values; review informal practices regularly.
- Use this framework to track progress over time and systematically strengthen your organisational culture.

Annex:

Annex 1 – Organisational Culture Self-Assessment Checklist

Employer Branding, ESG, and External Communication

Organisational culture and values shape both internal experiences and external perceptions. In cybersecurity organisations, employer branding and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) commitments. These frameworks, which guide sustainable and ethical business practices are extensions of culture into the public domain, influencing how potential candidates, partners, and stakeholders perceive the organisation (RCC, 2025). For HR teams, this means ensuring that external messaging accurately reflects internal practices, particularly regarding inclusion and gender equity.

The social dimension of ESG explicitly encompasses gender equality, inclusion, and fair employment practices. In practice, this translates to transparent recruitment, equitable progression, safe working conditions, and access to development opportunities. Cybersecurity organisations, including startups and larger companies in the Western Balkans, are increasingly expected by donors, partners, and regulators to demonstrate alignment between ESG commitments and observable practice (IREX Serbia, 2023; RCC, 2025). Gender sensitivity is critical because male-dominated technical teams are prone to exclusionary practices, limiting access

for women and reinforcing stereotypes about leadership, technical ability, and commitment.

ESG-related expectations are assessed across multiple touchpoints: recruitment criteria, internal HR policies, leadership behaviour, workplace experience, and external communication. For example, candidates may evaluate whether advertised roles, social media content, and career webpages genuinely reflect inclusive practices or merely aspirational messaging.

Why Employer Branding Matters in Cybersecurity

Employer branding is increasingly important for attracting and retaining talent in the cybersecurity sector. In a highly competitive labour market, potential candidates assess organisations not only on technical reputation, but also on workplace culture, values, credibility, and perceived fairness.

Younger generations entering the cybersecurity workforce, including Gen Z (generally defined as individuals born between approximately 1997 and 2012), place a strong emphasis on authenticity, transparency and organisational values. Employer credibility is increasingly assessed by comparing official communication with peer feedback, online platforms, and visible organisational practices.

Gen Z candidates typically look for:

- // clarity regarding expectations and working arrangements;
- // evidence of learning, mentorship, and development opportunities;
- // visible commitments to fairness, inclusion, and psychological safety;
- // consistency between stated values and everyday organisational behaviour.

For this group, employer branding that relies primarily on generic or aspirational language, without supporting evidence, may weaken trust rather than build it.

For women and other underrepresented groups, employer branding sends important signals about who belongs, who is likely to succeed, and how employees are treated in practice. These signals are particularly influential at early career stages, when candidates may have limited direct experience of the sector.

HR teams, therefore, have a critical role in ensuring that employer branding reflects organisational reality rather than aspiration alone.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Alignment with HR Practices	ESG messaging exists but is mostly aspirational; little evidence of alignment with recruitment, promotion, or reporting.	Messaging clearly references HR processes, progression criteria, reporting channels, and inclusion initiatives; backed by data on workforce composition.	Review all HR-linked ESG statements and ensure they match actual policies. Update external communication with concrete examples.
Gender Sensitivity	Generic inclusive language is used; no specific mention of gender equality, safe reporting, or development pathways for women.	Gender equity is explicitly addressed in messaging, including women in leadership roles, mentoring programs, flexible arrangements, and safe reporting channels.	Audit job ads, social media, websites, and public materials for gender-neutral and inclusive language. Add specific references to women's opportunities and protection measures.
Transparency and Credibility	Information on roles, expectations, and development is limited; this may create a perception of a male-dominated, high-pressure culture	Job descriptions, career pages, and social media clearly describe roles, working arrangements, mentoring, career pathways, and ESG alignment.	Standardise templates for job ads and career pages. Publish data on women in technical/ leadership roles. Include clear progression and reporting pathways.
Continuous Improvement	Employer branding is updated infrequently; feedback from employees or candidates is not systematically used.	Regular review cycle in place (e.g., quarterly) using HR metrics, recruitment outcomes, and employee surveys to adjust messaging.	Schedule quarterly reviews of all external communication. Compare messaging with employee experience data and recruitment results. Identify gaps and adjust accordingly.

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Candidate Perception & Gen Z Engagement	Messaging may not resonate with younger candidates; authenticity and transparency are unclear.	External messaging aligns with Gen Z and early-career professionals' expectations: clear pathways, authentic ESG commitments, and inclusive practices.	Highlight mentoring, learning opportunities, psychological safety, and women's leadership in external communication. Use real examples and measurable commitments.

Example: Recruitment Messaging and ESG Alignment

Scenario: A cybersecurity firm advertises roles that emphasise constant availability, long working hours, and high-pressure environments, without mentioning learning opportunities, mentorship, flexible work arrangements, or safe reporting channels. While intended to attract highly committed candidates, this messaging discourages women and early-career professionals, who may perceive the organisation as exclusionary or unsupportive of long-term career development.

Impact:

- Reduced diversity in applicant pools, particularly among women and early-career candidates.
- Self-selection out of qualified candidates due to perceived lack of support or growth opportunities.
- Misalignment between employer branding and ESG commitments, weakening organisational credibility.

What company can do:

- Review job descriptions and employer branding materials to ensure balanced representation of expectations and benefits.
- Clearly communicate development opportunities, including mentorship, training, and career progression pathways.
- Highlight flexible work arrangements and supportive policies to demonstrate inclusive practices.
- Align recruitment messaging with ESG commitments, particularly on gender equality and fair employment.
- Test messaging with target groups (e.g., women, early-career professionals) to ensure it is perceived as inclusive and realistic.
- Train HR and hiring managers to avoid exclusionary language and promote evidence-based communication.

Key takeaway:

Recruitment messaging is often the first point of contact between an organisation and potential candidates. Clear, transparent, and inclusive communication not only strengthens credibility but also broadens the talent pool. Aligning messaging with actual HR practices and ESG commitments ensures that organisations attract diverse candidates while reinforcing trust and authenticity, particularly among Gen Z professionals who prioritise consistency between stated values and lived experience.

Annexes:

- Annex 2 – Practical Checklist: Employer Branding, ESG and Inclusion
- Annex 3 – How HR Policies Contribute to ESG Goals

Understanding Micro-Biases in the HR Cycle

While employer branding and external communication shape expectations about an organisation, day-to-day HR decision-making determines whether those expectations are realised in practice. Even where policies and messaging reflect inclusive intent, informal judgements and habitual practices can unintentionally reproduce inequality.

Micro-biases operate at this intersection between intention and implementation. They influence how roles are defined, how performance is interpreted, and how access to opportunities is distributed across the HR cycle.

This section examines micro-biases in greater detail, focusing on where they most commonly occur in cybersecurity organisations and how HR teams can recognise, assess, and address their impact through concrete HR practices.

What Are Micro-Biases and Why They Matter

Micro-biases are subtle, often unintentional patterns of judgement or behaviour that influence workplace decisions. Unlike overt discrimination, they are embedded in everyday language, assumptions, and informal practices, making them harder to recognise and address.

In cybersecurity organisations—where technical expertise, speed, and resilience are highly valued—micro-biases can accumulate across the HR cycle. Over time, they influence who is recruited, how performance is interpreted, who is perceived as having leadership potential, and whose concerns are taken seriously.

Although individually small, these biases can have systemic effects. When left unaddressed, they contribute to unequal access to opportunities, lower retention of women and other underrepresented groups, and the normalisation of exclusionary practices.

Common Gender Micro-Biases in Cybersecurity Organisations

In cybersecurity organisations, gender micro-biases are subtle, often unintentional behaviours that reinforce stereotypes and affect women's participation, visibility, and career progression. Evidence from regional studies and organisational surveys highlights specific patterns:

Assumptions about technical competence

Male colleagues may assume women are less capable of complex technical tasks, often assigning them to support roles rather than core technical projects (ISC2, 2025).

Interruptions and speaking over

Women are frequently cut off during meetings by male colleagues, reducing their ability to contribute ideas or lead discussions.

Stereotypical comments and jokes

Male employees may make jokes about women’s appearance, wardrobe, or personal choices, which subtly undermines credibility and inclusion.

Confidence and assertiveness bias

Assertive communication by men is often praised, while collaborative or reflective styles, more commonly used by women, are overlooked.

Informal gatekeeping

Access to high-visibility projects, learning opportunities, or mentoring often depends on informal networks dominated by men, limiting women’s career development.

These behaviours are rarely malicious but are sustained by habit, organisational norms, and time pressure. Without deliberate reflection and intervention, they accumulate and create structural barriers that impede women’s full participation in cybersecurity teams.

Organisations can monitor and address these micro-biases by:

- Observing and documenting meeting dynamics to identify patterns of interruption or exclusion.
- Implementing clear criteria for project assignments and promotions to prevent reliance on informal networks.
- Providing bias-awareness training focused specifically on gender micro-behaviours.
- Establishing reporting and feedback channels for employees to highlight exclusionary behaviours safely.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Awareness	Limited awareness of micro-biases	Organisation-wide understanding of bias and its impact	Deliver targeted bias-awareness training for HR and managers
Recruitment	Informal or subjective hiring decisions	Structured, criteria-based recruitment processes	Introduce standardised interview questions and scoring rubrics
Performance Evaluation	Inconsistent and subjective feedback	Objective, criteria-based evaluation systems	Audit performance reviews for gendered language patterns
Career Development	Access depends on informal networks	Transparent and structured development pathways	Track access to projects, mentoring, and promotions by gender
Decision-Making	Bias not explicitly addressed	Bias mitigation embedded in HR processes	Introduce bias checkpoints in key HR decisions
Accountability	No monitoring of bias impact	Regular tracking and reporting of gender disparities	Establish KPIs on gender equality across HR lifecycle

Example: Micro-Bias in Performance Language

Scenario: In a cybersecurity organisation in the Western Balkans, two employees achieve comparable results and meet the same performance objectives. During performance reviews, one employee (a woman) is described as “reliable” and “supportive,” while the other (a man) is described as “strategic” and “leadership-oriented.” While both evaluations appear positive, the language used reflects different perceptions of their roles and potential.

Impact:

- // Employees described with leadership-oriented language are more likely to be considered for promotions, high-visibility projects, and mentoring opportunities.
- // Women are more frequently associated with supportive or execution-focused roles, limiting perceived leadership potential.
- // Over time, this reinforces structural barriers to advancement and contributes to gender imbalance in senior positions.

What company can do:

- // Standardise performance evaluation criteria to focus on measurable outcomes and competencies.
- // Train managers to recognise and avoid gendered language in feedback and evaluations.
- // Review past performance evaluations to identify patterns in descriptive language across genders.
- // Introduce calibration sessions where managers align on fair and consistent evaluation standards.

- // Encourage evidence-based feedback, linking descriptors directly to specific achievements and behaviours.

Key takeaway:

Subtle differences in language can have significant long-term effects on career progression. By ensuring that performance evaluations are objective, consistent, and free from bias, organisations can prevent micro-bias from shaping leadership pipelines and create more equitable opportunities for advancement.

Micro-Bias Risk Points Across the HR Lifecycle

Gender micro-biases tend to surface at predictable points within the HR cycle in cybersecurity organisations, including those in the Western Balkans. Recognising these points allows HR teams to intervene proactively and prevent subtle exclusion from accumulating into structural barriers.

Key risk points and why they matter:

Recruitment and Selection

Bias may appear in job descriptions, interview questions, evaluation criteria, or informal assessments of “fit.”

Impact: Women or underrepresented groups may be overlooked for technical or leadership roles despite equal qualifications.

Performance Evaluation

Comparable behaviours may be interpreted differently, with some achievements framed as effort or potential rather than measurable impact.

Impact: Biased language can affect visibility, promotions, and access to high-impact assignments.

Career Development and Progression

Access to high-visibility projects, mentoring, or leadership development may depend on informal sponsorship networks dominated by men.

Impact: Women and underrepresented groups miss opportunities for advancement, perpetuating underrepresentation in senior roles.

Workplace Conduct and Reporting

Concerns raised by junior staff or underrepresented groups may be minimised, reframed, or discouraged, especially in hierarchical technical teams.

Impact: Creates psychological safety risks, reduces trust in HR, and allows exclusionary norms to persist.

Practical Insight:

By mapping micro-bias risk points across the HR lifecycle, organisations can move from reactive problem-solving to proactive inclusion strategies. This ensures that formal equality policies are reflected in everyday practices, improves retention and career progression for women and underrepresented groups, and strengthens overall organisational performance.

Reflection Tool and Action for HR Professionals

Addressing gender micro-biases requires both awareness and practical follow-through. HR professionals can use the questions below to reflect on their own decision-making patterns, and then translate insights into concrete actions:

Reflection questions:

- /// Which assumptions do we most often rely on when making HR decisions?
- /// How do we define “high potential” or “cultural fit” in practice?
- /// When do time pressure and operational urgency override reflection?
- /// How do we respond when concerns about bias or unfairness are raised?

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Reflection and Awareness	HR professionals occasionally reflect on decision-making, but without structured tools or regular practice.	Reflection is embedded through regular check-ins, guided questions, and team discussions on bias and fairness.	Introduce structured reflection sessions using guiding questions (e.g. assumptions, “cultural fit,” urgency vs fairness). Integrate reflection into HR workflows and decision reviews.
Recruitment and Selection	Job descriptions and interviews may contain subjective or gendered language; hiring decisions are partially structured.	Recruitment processes are standardised, with clear criteria, diverse panels, and bias-aware evaluation tools.	Audit job descriptions and interview processes for bias. Use structured scoring systems and ensure diverse hiring panels for all roles.
Performance Evaluation	Feedback and appraisals vary by manager; language may reflect unconscious bias.	Evaluation criteria and language are standardised, with regular calibration across teams	Conduct audits of past evaluations to identify gendered patterns. Train managers to use objective, evidence-based language linked to performance outcomes.
Career Progression and Development	Access to opportunities (projects, mentoring) is informal and not systematically tracked.	Career pathways are transparent, and participation in development opportunities is monitored by gender.	Track access to high-visibility projects and mentoring. Rotate opportunities and formalise selection processes to reduce reliance on informal networks.

Workplace Conduct and Reporting	Reporting channels exist but may not be fully trusted or consistently used.	Safe, confidential reporting mechanisms are actively promoted and consistently acted upon.	Establish and communicate clear reporting channels. Monitor cases and ensure consistent follow-up regardless of seniority or role.
Embedding Reflective Practice	Reflection on bias is ad hoc and not linked to organisational processes.	Continuous learning and reflection are embedded into HR systems, policies, and team routines.	Schedule regular HR case reviews and learning sessions. Use tools and frameworks (e.g. annexed materials) to ensure consistent, fair decision-making.

Annexes:
 Annex 4 – Practical Checklist: Identifying Micro-Biases in HR Decision-Making
 Annex 5 – Consolidated List of Common Micro-Biases

Gender-Sensitive Recruitment and Job Design

Understanding micro-biases across the HR cycle is a critical first step. Meaningful change occurs when this awareness is translated into concrete recruitment and job design practices.

Recruitment is a critical entry point into cybersecurity organisations, shaping who applies, who is shortlisted, and who is ultimately perceived as suitable for a role. In contexts like the Western Balkans, where talent shortages are acute, recruitment decisions can either perpetuate gender imbalances or promote equitable access to opportunities.

Women and other underrepresented groups may be discouraged from applying if job descriptions use gendered or “male-coded” language, emphasise long hours, or do not highlight organisational support for work-life balance. Biases during shortlisting or interviews, conscious or unconscious, can favour male candidates for technical or leadership roles, limiting the diversity of the talent pipeline. To address this, HR teams should use inclusive job descriptions, standardised evaluation criteria, diverse hiring panels, and transparent role classifications, and monitor applications and hiring outcomes by

gender. Integrating these gender-sensitive recruitment practices allows organisations to broaden their talent pool, enhance inclusion, and maintain high technical standards while reducing structural barriers in cybersecurity teams.

Gender Bias in Job Advertisements

Job advertisements do more than describe roles; they communicate expectations, values, and assumptions about who belongs in an organisation. Even language that appears neutral may carry subtle gendered signals, influencing who feels encouraged to apply. In the Western Balkans, studies show that women are less likely to respond to ads that emphasise extreme availability, dominance, or leadership traits traditionally coded as masculine, even when they meet all technical requirements (IREX Serbia, 2023; RCC, 2025).

Common Gender-Linked Risks in Job Ads:

- Overly long or unprioritised lists of requirements: Women may self-select out of applications if not every criterion is strictly met, while men are more likely to apply even when only partially qualified.
- Emphasis on constant availability or high-pressure environments: Phrases like “always-on” or “extreme deadlines” can discourage candidates with caregiving responsibilities, disproportionately affecting women.
- Gender-coded language: Terms such as “aggressive,” “dominant leadership,” or “risk-taker” are more strongly associated with male stereotypes, while communal or supportive language is more often linked to women.

- Lack of information on flexibility or development opportunities: Omitting references to learning, career growth, or flexible arrangements can reduce interest from women who prioritise work-life balance or professional development.

Addressing these elements supports more inclusive recruitment without compromising role requirements.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Job Design	Roles are loosely defined, responsibilities vary by manager	Roles are clearly defined, responsibilities and competencies	Standardise job descriptions and responsibilities across teams
Language	Job ads contain gender-coded or exclusive language	Inclusive, neutral language is used and reviewed	Audit and revise all job advertisements and internal postings
Selection Criteria	Subjective or inconsistent criteria applied	Clear, structured, and objective criteria are used for evaluation	Use scoring rubrics and document decisions consistently
Panels	Hiring panels lack diversity or structure	Diverse and structured panels are implemented	Ensure gender balance and include structured interview processes

Example: Job Advertisement Language:

A cybersecurity organisation in the Western Balkans advertised a network security role with extensive technical requirements, using descriptors such as “highly aggressive,” “dominant leadership,” and “always-on availability.” While intended to signal high performance and commitment, this language discouraged qualified women from applying. Feedback from potential applicants indicated that such wording suggested a highly competitive, inflexible, and male-dominated work environment, leading many to self-select out despite meeting the technical criteria.

Impact:

- Reduced number of applications from qualified women and underrepresented candidates.
- Reinforcement of gender stereotypes about leadership and workplace behaviour.
- Narrower and less diverse talent pipeline, limiting organisational innovation and growth.

What company can do:

- Review job advertisements for gender-coded language, focusing on removing terms associated with stereotypes.
- Emphasise competencies, skills, and expected outcomes rather than personality traits.
- Highlight inclusive practices, such as flexibility, learning opportunities, and career development pathways.
- Test job ads with diverse candidate groups to assess how messaging is perceived.

Track application and hiring data by gender to evaluate the impact of changes and continuously improve recruitment practices.

Key takeaway:

The language used in job advertisements shapes who applies, not just who is hired. By using clear, inclusive, and competency-based messaging, organisations can attract a broader and more diverse talent pool while maintaining high technical standards and avoiding the reinforcement of gender stereotypes.

Job Titles, Classifications, and Perceived Seniority

Job titles and classifications shape how roles are perceived internally and externally. Titles signal seniority, credibility, and career trajectory, often beyond the actual scope of responsibilities.

In cybersecurity organisations, inconsistent use of titles may reflect legacy structures or informal negotiations rather than objective role assessment. Over time, this can contribute to unequal recognition, pay disparities and restricted access to progression.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Job Title Accuracy	Titles exist but may not reflect actual responsibilities or seniority.	Titles are standardised and clearly linked to responsibilities, competencies, and organisational hierarchy.	Conduct title audits, align titles with roles, update descriptions to reflect competencies accurately.
Gender Equity in Classification	No tracking of gender distribution by role or title.	Gender representation is monitored; discrepancies in titles are addressed proactively.	Track assignments and promotions by gender, identify patterns, adjust titles and assignments to promote equity.
Internal Communication & Recognition	Achievements are inconsistently communicated; titles drive perceived status.	All contributions are recognised transparently, reducing reliance on titles for perceived authority.	Highlight accomplishments and leadership contributions in communications and performance discussions.
Periodic Review legacy structures persist. equity goals.	Titles and classifications are rarely revisited.	Regular reviews of roles and titles ensure ongoing alignment with responsibilities, career pathways, and evolving organizational needs.	Schedule annual or bi-annual reviews; update job classifications and titles based on changing roles and equity assessments.

Example: Job classification

Scenario: Two cybersecurity roles involve comparable technical responsibilities. One is titled “Security Lead”, while the other is titled “Security Support Officer”. Although the responsibilities are similar, the difference in titles can shape perceptions of seniority, authority, and career potential. Research and organisational surveys in the Western Balkans show that women are more likely to be placed in roles with “support” or less senior-sounding titles, even when performing the same tasks as

male colleagues. This can affect salary expectations, access to high-visibility projects, and promotion opportunities, reinforcing gender disparities in technical and leadership pipelines.

Impact:

- // Women may be discouraged from applying for or aspiring to leadership positions.
- // Managers' assumptions about competence and potential may be skewed by titles rather than actual performance.
- // Gender disparities are reinforced in technical and leadership pipelines, affecting pay equity and career progression.

What company can do:

- // Audit job titles and role descriptions to identify gendered or misleading connotations.
- // Align titles with actual responsibilities and required competencies to ensure transparency.
- // Track gender-based role assignments, promotions, and salary data to identify inequities.
- // Communicate achievements and leadership contributions consistently, regardless of title.
- // Review job classifications periodically to maintain equity as the organisation evolves.

Key takeaway:

Job titles are more than labels. They communicate status, credibility, and career potential. By ensuring that titles accurately reflect responsibilities and by monitoring gender patterns, organisations can prevent informal biases from shaping career trajectories and promote equitable, gender-inclusive progression.

Designing Fair and Transparent Selection Criteria

Clear and prioritised selection criteria support consistent, defensible, and gender-inclusive decision-making. Distinguishing between essential requirements and skills that can be developed reduces unnecessary barriers to entry, particularly for women and under-represented groups who may self-select out of roles when criteria are overly broad or subjective.

Good practice includes:

- // Defining a limited number of core technical and behavioural requirements.
- // Clearly separating essential versus desirable criteria to avoid unnecessary gatekeeping.
- // Aligning interview questions and assessment tasks with the defined competencies.
- // Documenting all selection decisions using the agreed criteria to ensure transparency.

These measures reduce reliance on **subjective judgement, informal impressions, and gendered assumptions**, which can unintentionally disadvantage women or underrepresented candidates. By standardising criteria and decisions, organisations improve fairness, attract a more diverse applicant pool, and support equitable access to technical and leadership roles.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Selection Criteria Clarity	Selection criteria exist but may be broad, inconsistent, or subjective.	Core technical and behavioural requirements are clearly defined and prioritised, with essential vs desirable criteria explicitly distinguished.	Audit existing job requirements, define 3–5 essential core competencies per role, separate essential from desirable skills.
Gender-Inclusive Design	Criteria are not reviewed for potential barriers; underrepresented groups may self-select out.	Criteria are reviewed for inclusivity; adjustments are made to remove unnecessary barriers.	Review criteria for gender-coded language, overemphasis on rigid experience requirements, or non-essential qualifications.
Assessment Alignment	Interview questions and assessment tasks may not consistently reflect defined criteria.	All assessments, interviews, and evaluation rubrics are aligned with core competencies and prioritised criteria.	Map interview questions and tasks to the defined criteria; eliminate unrelated or subjective assessments.
Decision Transparency	Selection decisions are not consistently documented; subjective judgement may dominate.	All hiring decisions are documented against defined criteria; rationales for selections are transparent and auditable.	Maintain standardised evaluation forms, require scoring against criteria, store decision documentation for review and calibration.
Fairness Monitoring	No tracking of impact by gender or other underrepresented groups.	Outcomes are regularly analysed to detect patterns of bias or exclusion and inform improvements.	Track applicant pools, interview outcomes, and hiring decisions by gender; adjust criteria or processes if inequities emerge.

Inclusive Job Advertisement

An inclusive job advertisement clearly communicates the role, expectations, and organisational values while actively encouraging a diverse range of candidates to apply. Key elements of an inclusive ad include:

- /// A concise description of the role’s purpose and contribution;
- /// A prioritised list of essential skills and experience;
- /// A separate list of desirable or development-oriented skills;
- /// Transparent information on working arrangements and expectations;
- /// A clear statement of the organisation’s commitment to fair and inclusive recruitment.

Top Actions for HR Teams:

- /// Review existing job ads and recruitment materials – check career pages, social media posts, and previous advertisements for gendered language or exclusionary phrasing.
- /// Use standardised templates – apply role-specific templates that prioritise essential competencies and include inclusive language.
- /// Consult toolkit annexes – refer to the Employer Branding, ESG and Inclusion checklist, as well as Recruitment and Job Design Templates/examples to ensure language, tone, and messaging support inclusion.
- /// Iterate and monitor – track applicant demographics to evaluate whether revisions increase diversity in the applicant pool, and adjust wording or format as needed.

By applying these practices, HR teams can broaden the talent pool, reduce gender-based self-selection, and ensure fair access to opportunities, while maintaining role-specific standards.

Example A: IT Position

Original Job Ad: “We are looking for a skilled systems engineer ready to join a dynamic and challenging team, lead technical projects, and demonstrate leadership skills.”

Inclusive Version: “We are looking for a systems engineering professional who will contribute to developing innovative IT solutions in collaboration with diverse teams. The role values technical expertise, teamwork and a willingness to learn.”

Example B: Leadership role in a technical team

Original Job Ad: “We are looking for a confident leader who will inspire the team and make key decisions.”

Inclusive Version: “We are looking for a person who leads through collaboration, supports shared decision-making and fosters open communication within the team.”

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Role Clarity	Job ads describe the position superficially; responsibilities and impact are vague.	Ads clearly articulate the role’s purpose, contribution, and scope, with a prioritised list of essential and desirable skills.	Review ads for clarity; define core responsibilities and outcomes; separate essential vs development-oriented skills.
Inclusivity of Language	Ads may contain gender-coded or exclusionary language; tone may reflect organisational bias.	Language is neutral, inclusive, and encourages diverse candidates to apply.	Audit wording for bias; remove gender-coded or culturally loaded terms; apply standardised inclusive templates.
Transparency of Working Arrangements	Work expectations and arrangements are implicit or unclear.	Ads provide clear, transparent information on working hours, flexibility, and organisational policies.	Include details on flexibility, parental leave, hybrid options, and performance expectations in all ads.
Commitment to Fair Recruitment	Organisation’s inclusion and equity values are not communicated.	Job ads explicitly state commitment to inclusive recruitment and equitable opportunities.	Include statements on diversity, equity, and inclusion; link to ESG or employer branding commitments.
Monitoring and Iteration	Applicant demographics are not tracked; impact of ad revisions is unknown.	Demographics and outcomes are monitored; ads are iteratively refined to improve diversity in the applicant pool.	Track applicant data by gender and other underrepresented groups; adjust ad wording, templates, and channels as needed.

Job Classification and Title Review

Regular review of job classifications enables HR teams to:

- // assess alignment between job titles and actual responsibilities;
- // identify potential gendered patterns in role allocation;
- // ensure consistency across departments and teams;
- // support fair pay structures and progression frameworks.

Structured review tools help shift discussions from informal negotiation to evidence-based decision-making.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Title-Responsibility Alignment	Job titles exist but may not accurately reflect actual responsibilities or seniority.	Titles are regularly reviewed and fully aligned with responsibilities, competencies, and organisational hierarchy.	Conduct periodic audits of all job titles vs responsibilities; adjust titles to match scope and seniority.
Gender Equity in Classification	No systematic tracking of gender distribution across roles or titles.	Gender patterns are monitored; disparities are addressed proactively to prevent inequities.	Track assignments, promotions, and classifications by gender; adjust allocations to reduce gendered patterns.
Consistency Across Teams	Classifications and titles vary between departments or teams, creating confusion.	Standardised frameworks are applied across all teams, ensuring consistency and transparency.	Develop and apply structured classification tools; harmonise titles and responsibilities across units.
Pay and Progression Alignment	Compensation and promotion criteria may not reflect actual responsibilities or classification levels.	Job classifications inform fair pay structures and progression frameworks, reducing bias.	Link titles and classifications to pay bands and promotion criteria; review regularly to maintain fairness.
Evidence-Based Decision Making	Title changes and classifications are influenced by informal negotiation or subjective impressions.	Structured review tools guide decisions, ensuring transparency, fairness, and defensibility.	Implement structured review templates, scorecards, or checklists to guide classification updates.

Recruitment as an Ongoing Process

Gender-sensitive recruitment is not a one-off intervention. Regular review of job advertisements, selection outcomes, and role classifications allows organizations to identify patterns, adjust practices, and respond to changing labour market dynamics. When recruitment practices align with organisational values, employer branding commitments, and bias-aware decision-making, they contribute to stronger, more effective teams and more sustainable talent pipelines.

Research shows that diverse teams—across gender, experience, and perspectives—perform better in problem-solving, innovation, and decision-making. In cybersecurity, where technical challenges are complex and require rapid, collaborative solutions, teams that include women and underrepresented groups bring different viewpoints, challenge assumptions, and enhance organisational resilience. By maintaining ongoing, gender-sensitive recruitment, organisations ensure that their talent pipelines not only meet technical needs but also foster inclusive, high-performing teams.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Continuous Review of Recruitment Materials	Job ads and recruitment materials are updated irregularly; potential bias may persist.	Job advertisements, selection criteria, and role classifications are reviewed regularly for inclusivity and alignment with organisational values.	Schedule periodic audits of all recruitment materials; remove biased language; ensure alignment with ESG and inclusion commitments.
Selection Outcome Monitoring	Recruitment outcomes are not systematically tracked; gender or diversity gaps may go unnoticed.	Applicant pools, shortlists, and hires are tracked by gender and other underrepresented groups; trends inform continuous improvement.	Collect and analyse data on applicants, interviewees, and hires by gender; identify patterns and adjust processes.
Alignment with Organisational Values and Employer Branding	Recruitment processes may not consistently reflect stated organisational values or ESG commitments.	Recruitment practices explicitly align with employer branding, organisational values, and bias-aware decision-making.	Cross-check recruitment messaging and procedures against organisational values and ESG commitments; adjust where inconsistencies exist.
Diversity and Team Impact	Teams are formed without consideration of diversity; underrepresented groups may be excluded from key roles.	Recruitment aims to build diverse, high-performing teams, recognising benefits of varied perspectives for innovation and problem-solving.	Include diversity goals in recruitment planning; ensure teams have balanced representation; rotate roles to increase exposure and experience.
Ongoing Improvement and Responsiveness	Recruitment processes are static and reactive; adjustments occur only after issues arise.	Processes are iterative and proactive, responding to labour market changes, feedback, and organisational needs.	Implement continuous feedback loops; regularly update criteria, processes, and communication channels; track impact on talent pipeline.

Annexes:

Annex 6 – Inclusive Job Advertisement Template

Annex 7 – Job Advertisement Review Tool

Annex 8 – Job Classification and Title Review Template

Progression, Promotion and Leadership Pathways

Inclusive recruitment and job design are necessary but not sufficient to achieve gender-sensitive HR outcomes. Long-term equity depends on what happens after entry: how performance is recognised, development opportunities are distributed, and progression decisions are made.

In cybersecurity organisations in the Western Balkans, progression pathways are often shaped by fast-moving projects, informal sponsorship, and perceptions of “leadership potential”. Without transparent structures, these dynamics can unintentionally favour men or employees who conform to established male-dominated norms. Research shows that in regional IT and cybersecurity teams, women represent only 11–15% of senior and executive roles (IREX Serbia, 2023; RCC, 2025).

Transparency in Progression and Promotion Processes

Clear progression frameworks help employees understand what is expected, how decisions are made, and how they can prepare for advancement. Without this transparency, progression is perceived as arbitrary or dependent on informal networks.

Good practice includes:

- Clearly defined progression criteria and role expectations, linked to competencies and outcomes.
- Documented promotion processes with indicative timelines.
- Consistent application of criteria across teams and genders.
- Communication of promotion decisions and constructive feedback.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Transparency	Promotion criteria unclear or informal.	Documented, transparent criteria consistently applied.	Communicate promotion criteria and review processes regularly.
Access to Opportunity	Opportunities allocated informally.	Equitable access to projects, mentoring, and leadership opportunities.	Monitor project assignments and mentoring access by gender.
Evaluation	Performance interpreted subjectively.	Structured, objective evaluation processes.	Train managers on bias-aware performance assessment.
Leadership	Limited leadership programs, informal mentoring.	Formal mentorship and sponsorship programs with gender balance.	Development Implement structured leadership pathways for underrepresented groups.

Example: Informal progression criteria

Scenario: A regional cybersecurity team routinely promoted staff based on managers' subjective perception of "fit" or "readiness," without documented criteria or transparent evaluation processes. Women, despite meeting or exceeding performance objectives, were less likely to be promoted because informal networks and visibility in decision-making channels favoured male employees.

Impact:

- High-performing women are systematically excluded from leadership and career progression opportunities.
- Gender gaps in senior roles persist, reducing organisational diversity and innovation.
- Perceptions of unfairness undermine employee engagement, trust in HR processes, and overall morale.

What company can do:

- Develop and communicate clear, evidence-based promotion criteria linked to measurable performance and competencies.
- Document promotion decisions to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Track promotions by gender to identify disparities and address gaps proactively.
- Train managers to recognise unconscious bias and avoid over-reliance on informal networks or subjective "fit" assessments.
- Introduce structured mentorship and sponsorship programs to support underrepresented groups in career progression.

Key Takeaway:

Informal progression practices disproportionately disadvantage women and reinforce systemic inequities. By implementing transparent, evidence-based promotion frameworks, organisations can ensure fair advancement, enhance diversity in leadership, and strengthen employee trust and organisational credibility.

Visibility, Sponsorship and Access to Opportunity

Progression often depends on access to high-impact projects, sponsorship from senior leaders, and informal networks. These are not always distributed evenly: women in the Western Balkans cybersecurity sector frequently report limited access to stretch assignments and mentoring (IREX Serbia, 2023).

HR Actions:

- // Monitor allocation of high-visibility projects and leadership opportunities by gender.
- // Establish structured sponsorship and mentoring programmes.
- // Communicate development opportunities transparently and widely.
- // Recognise and value diverse leadership styles beyond assertiveness or availability.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Access to High-Impact Projects	High-visibility assignments are allocated informally; distribution may favour certain groups.	Allocation of high-impact projects is monitored by gender and other underrepresented groups to ensure equitable access.	Track project assignments by gender; rotate stretch assignments; ensure transparency in decision-making.
Sponsorship and Mentoring	Sponsorship and mentoring are ad hoc; employees rely on informal networks for support.	Structured sponsorship and mentoring programs are in place, explicitly supporting underrepresented employees.	Establish formal mentorship and sponsorship programs; match participants with senior leaders; monitor participation and outcomes.
Communication of Opportunities	Development opportunities are not consistently communicated; awareness relies on informal channels.	Opportunities for growth, training, and leadership roles are communicated transparently and widely.	Use multiple channels (meetings, intranet, newsletters) to announce opportunities; ensure all employees are informed.
Recognition of Diverse Leadership Styles	Leadership is valued primarily according to assertiveness or constant availability.	Diverse leadership styles (collaboration, empathy, strategic thinking) are recognised and rewarded.	Include diverse leadership competencies in performance criteria; provide training to managers to value different approaches.
Monitoring and Accountability	No systematic tracking of access or outcomes; inequities may persist unnoticed.	Outcomes are regularly monitored and reviewed to address gaps in visibility, sponsorship, and advancement.	Analyse participation in key projects, mentoring, and leadership programs by gender; take corrective action if disparities exist.

Example: Visibility and recognition**Scenario:**

A female security analyst consistently delivered strong results, yet she had limited exposure to senior leadership because key meetings and decision-making sessions were scheduled outside standard working hours. As a result, despite performance metrics equal to her male peers, she was overlooked for leadership programs and high-visibility opportunities.

Impact:

- /// Talented employees are systematically excluded from leadership pipelines.
- /// Homogeneity in leadership persists, limiting diverse perspectives in strategic decisions.
- /// Organisational resilience, innovation, and team problem-solving capacity are reduced.
- /// Employees perceive inequity, which can lower engagement and retention.

What company can do:

- /// Audit scheduling practices to ensure key meetings and leadership opportunities are accessible to all employees.
- /// Rotate high-visibility project assignments and leadership program nominations to include underrepresented groups.
- /// Track participation and representation in leadership programs by gender and level.
- /// Encourage managers to actively recognise and highlight contributions of employees who may be less visible due to scheduling or other constraints.

- /// Provide alternative avenues for exposure, such as recorded briefings, flexible participation options, or mentorship introductions to senior leadership.

Key Takeaway:

Without intentional mechanisms to ensure visibility, high-performing employees—particularly women and underrepresented groups—can be overlooked, weakening leadership diversity and organisational resilience. Proactive exposure, recognition, and equitable access to opportunities strengthen teams, innovation, and employee engagement.

Performance, Potential, and Gendered Expectations

Assessments of “potential” are vulnerable to micro-bias. Studies in the region and globally show women’s achievements are often interpreted as past performance, while men’s similar work is read as an indicator of future leadership potential (Catalyst, 2007; McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2022).

This affects:

- /// Nominations for leadership programs.
- /// Access to high-profile assignments.
- /// Readiness perception for promotion.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Objective Performance Assessment	Performance evaluations rely heavily on subjective impressions; descriptors may be gendered.	Performance assessments use objective criteria and measurable outcomes; standardised language is applied.	Standardise evaluation templates; train managers to focus on measurable results; audit past reviews for gendered language patterns.
Potential and Future Readiness	“Potential” assessments are informal and influenced by micro-bias; women’s achievements interpreted as past performance.	Structured frameworks guide potential assessment; decisions are calibrated to reduce gender bias.	Implement clear criteria for potential; differentiate between demonstrated performance and leadership potential; calibrate ratings across managers.
Access to Development Opportunities	Leadership programs and high-profile assignments are allocated inconsistently; informal networks dominate.	Allocation of assignments and nominations is monitored for equity; underrepresented groups are proactively included.	Track access to leadership programs and stretch assignments by gender; rotate opportunities; communicate openly about selection criteria.
Bias Awareness and Mitigation	Managers have limited awareness of micro-bias; decisions are unchallenged.	Training on gendered expectations and bias is mandatory; ongoing reflection and monitoring are embedded.	Conduct regular training on micro-bias; use reflection tools and structured case reviews; provide guidance for fair decision-making.
Monitoring and Accountability	No systematic review of potential-related decisions; inequities persist unnoticed.	Outcomes of potential assessments, promotions, and program nominations are regularly reviewed for gender equity.	Analyse nominations, assignments, and promotions by gender; adjust processes to address disparities; report findings to leadership.

Example: Potential versus performance

Scenario: Two employees met performance objectives; a male colleague was labelled “high potential” and selected for a leadership track, while a female colleague received positive feedback but no further opportunities.

Impact:

- Unequal interpretation of performance creates cumulative disadvantage for women over time.
- The talent pool for senior leadership shrinks, limiting diverse perspectives in decision-making.
- Organisational innovation, resilience, and problem-solving capacity may be reduced.
- Employees perceive inequity, which can lower engagement and retention.

What company can do:

- Ensure assessment frameworks are evidence-based and designed to reduce bias.
- Review performance evaluations and promotion criteria for consistency across genders.
- Provide mentorship or sponsorship programs to support high-performing employees who may be overlooked.
- Track leadership nominations and development opportunities by gender and other underrepresented groups.
- Offer transparent pathways for advancement and regular feedback on potential and career development.

Key Takeaway:

Without structured, bias-aware assessment and development mechanisms, high-performing employees, particularly women and underrepresented groups, can be overlooked, weakening leadership diversity and organisational resilience. Proactive recognition, mentorship, and equitable access to opportunities strengthen engagement, talent retention, and team performance.

Supporting Early-Career and Gen Z Progression Expectations

Early-career professionals, including members of Generation Z, often place high value on clarity around development pathways, feedback and learning opportunities. In cybersecurity environments, where roles evolve rapidly, explicit guidance supports engagement and retention.

Clear progression frameworks enable employees to plan development proactively, rather than relying on informal signals or assumptions about advancement.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Progression Frameworks	Career paths are informal; early-career staff rely on implicit signals for advancement.	Clear, documented progression frameworks exist, showing potential roles, skills, and competencies.	Develop and publish progression maps for all roles; link skills to next-level responsibilities.
Feedback and Mentorship	Feedback is irregular; mentoring occurs informally and inconsistently.	Regular, structured feedback cycles and formal mentoring programs are in place for early-career staff.	Schedule recurring performance and development feedback sessions; assign mentors or sponsors to support growth.
Learning and Development Opportunities	Learning resources are ad hoc; employees must self-identify opportunities.	Accessible, structured learning pathways support technical and leadership development aligned with career plans.	Provide curated learning programs, workshops, and training opportunities; track participation and outcomes.
Transparency and Communication	Advancement criteria and development opportunities are unclear; employees rely on assumptions.	Criteria, expectations, and opportunities are communicated clearly, aligning with organisational values and HR policies.	Share transparent guidelines for promotions, training, and project allocation; use multiple channels to reach early-career staff.

HR Actions to Support Fair Progression

Early-career employees value clarity, feedback, and development pathways. In dynamic cybersecurity roles, explicit guidance helps women and younger employees navigate career options, increasing retention and engagement.

HR Action Points:

- /// Standardise promotion criteria and documentation to ensure gender equity.
- /// Review historical progression outcomes and measure female representation at each leadership level.
- /// Integrate bias-awareness into performance reviews and promotion assessments.
- /// Provide managers with tools and guidance for inclusive leadership development.
- /// Establish structured mentorship and sponsorship programmes prioritising underrepresented groups.

Evidence shows organisations with greater female representation in leadership experience:

- /// Improved decision-making and innovation.
- /// Higher employee engagement and retention.
- /// Enhanced credibility with clients, regulators, and boards.

In cybersecurity, where complex problem-solving and rapid response are critical, diverse leadership directly contributes to organisational resilience and effectiveness.

Fair and transparent progression pathways are a critical lever for retention in the cybersecurity sector. When employees understand how decisions are made and see that opportunities are distributed consistently, trust, motivation and engagement increase. Alignment between performance, development and progression strengthens organisational credibility and supports long-term workforce sustainability.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Promotion Criteria and Documentation	Criteria for promotion are informal or inconsistently applied; gender bias may persist.	Standardised, documented criteria ensure fair and consistent evaluation across all employees.	Develop clear promotion guidelines; document all decisions; communicate criteria to staff.
Monitoring Representation and Outcomes	Historical progression data is not analysed; female representation may be unknown.	Historical and ongoing data is tracked; gaps in female representation are identified and addressed.	Analyse promotion outcomes by gender; report trends; take corrective actions where disparities exist.
Bias Awareness in Evaluations	Managers are not trained to recognise gender bias; subjective impressions dominate performance and promotion decisions.	Bias-awareness is integrated into performance reviews and promotion assessments, with structured frameworks guiding decisions.	Provide bias training for managers; implement structured evaluation templates; conduct calibration sessions.
Inclusive Leadership Development	Managerial development is generic; underrepresented groups may have limited access to it.	Structured leadership programs support inclusive development and provide equitable access for women and early-career employees.	Provide tools, guidance, and mentoring programs; prioritise underrepresented groups; track participation and outcomes.
Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs	Mentoring and sponsorship are informal and ad hoc.	Structured programs ensure access to sponsorship and mentorship for career growth, particularly for underrepresented employees.	Establish formal mentorship/sponsorship programs; match mentees with senior leaders; monitor impact.

Annexes:
Annex 9 – Case Cards: Progression and Leadership Pathways

Safe and Trusted Reporting Mechanisms

Fair recruitment, transparent progression, and inclusive leadership pathways rely on a work environment where employees feel safe to speak up. Without trusted reporting mechanisms, misconduct, harassment, or gender-based discrimination often remain unaddressed, undermining organisational culture and HR systems.

In cybersecurity organisations, where technical authority, hierarchical structures, and time pressure are prevalent, male-dominated teams can amplify risks of exclusion and harassment. Studies in the Western Balkans indicate that women in IT and cybersecurity roles report experiencing sexual harassment, inappropriate comments, and exclusion from decision-making networks, which are often underreported due to fear of retaliation or reputational damage (IREX Serbia, 2023; RCC, 2025).

Why Reporting Mechanisms Matter

Reporting mechanisms are not only a compliance requirement; they are a core component of organisational integrity, gender equity, and employee protection. Effective systems:

- Enable early identification of risks, including sexual harassment and gender-based misconduct.
- Protect individuals from retaliation or isolation.
- Support fair and timely resolution of concerns.
- Reinforce trust in leadership and HR processes, which is critical in male-dominated sectors where informal power dynamics can silence underrepresented employees.

Where reporting systems are unclear, inaccessible or inconsistently applied, harmful behaviour is more likely to persist and organisational credibility is weakened.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Accessibility of Reporting Channels	Employees have limited or unclear options for reporting misconduct; awareness is low.	Multiple, clearly communicated channels exist for confidential reporting of misconduct, harassment, or discrimination.	Establish email, hotline, and digital reporting options; provide clear instructions on how to use them; ensure anonymity where needed.
Protection Against Retaliation	No formal safeguards.	Policies explicitly protect reporters from retaliation, isolation, or reputational harm.	Implement anti-retaliation policies; communicate protections to all staff; monitor outcomes to ensure enforcement.
Timely and Fair Resolution	Reports may be ignored or resolved inconsistently; accountability is unclear.	All reports are assessed promptly with transparent processes; outcomes are communicated appropriately.	Set standard response times; assign trained investigators; track resolution steps and outcomes; report trends to leadership.
Integration with HR and Leadership Practices	Reporting is isolated from broader HR systems; leaders may not act consistently.	Reporting mechanisms are embedded into HR policies and organisational culture; leaders are accountable for reinforcing safe practices.	Include reporting metrics in HR dashboards; train managers to respond appropriately; regularly review system effectiveness.
Trust and Cultural Reinforcement	Employees do not feel confident that concerns will be addressed; informal hierarchies may discourage reporting.	Employees trust that reporting mechanisms are fair and effective; organisational culture actively promotes safety and inclusion.	Communicate success stories while preserving confidentiality; reinforce leadership commitment to safe workplaces; conduct surveys to gauge trust in systems.

Barriers to Reporting in Practice

Even when policies exist, employees may hesitate to report concerns due to:

- limited trust in confidentiality;
- fear of negative career consequences;
- uncertainty about what happens after a report is made;
- previous experiences of minimisation or inaction;
- power imbalances within teams or hierarchies.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Accessibility	Reporting channels unclear or difficult to access.	Clearly defined, accessible reporting channels.	Publish and communicate reporting pathways to all staff.
Confidentiality	No assurance of confidentiality.	Confidentiality is guaranteed and enforced.	Train HR and managers to maintain confidentiality.
Response	Inconsistent or delayed response.	Timely, standardised response procedures	Set clear timelines and protocols for handling reports
Accountability	Follow-up and systemic learning absent.	Regular monitoring and accountability for outcomes.	Track reports and link to leadership accountability metrics.

Example: Reluctance to report

Scenario: A female cybersecurity analyst experiences repeated inappropriate comments about her appearance and abilities. She chooses not to report the behaviour, fearing it will be dismissed as “part of the culture” and concerned that speaking up could negatively affect her future project assignments or promotion opportunities.

Impact:

- /// Harmful behaviour becomes normalised, creating a hostile work environment.
- /// Women and other underrepresented groups face disproportionate barriers to participation and career progression.
- /// Trust in HR and leadership erodes, reducing reporting rates and employee engagement.
- /// Retention suffers as employees perceive the organisation as unsafe or inequitable.

What company can do:

- /// Implement safe, confidential, and accessible reporting channels, including anonymous or third-party options.
- /// Clearly communicate zero-tolerance policies for harassment and discrimination.
- /// Train managers and HR staff to respond promptly, neutrally, and respectfully to reports.
- /// Monitor reporting trends by gender to identify systemic risks and hotspots of misconduct.

- /// Establish follow-up mechanisms that protect reporters from retaliation and provide support resources such as counseling or ombudsperson services.

Key Takeaway:

When reporting is perceived as risky, toxic behaviours persist and organisational culture suffers. Embedding trusted, transparent, and responsive reporting mechanisms ensures psychological safety, reinforces gender equity, and strengthens employee trust, engagement, and retention.

Designing Clear and Accessible Reporting Pathways

Effective reporting mechanisms are easy to understand, accessible, and responsive. Good practice includes:

- /// Clearly defined reporting channels, including formal, confidential, and anonymous options.
- /// Trusted points of contact within HR or management trained in handling gender-based complaints.
- /// Written guidance on reporting steps and expected timelines.
- /// Explicit assurances of confidentiality and non-retaliation, particularly for gender-related concerns.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Clarity of Reporting Channels	Reporting options are unclear or inconsistently communicated; employees are unsure where to go.	Multiple, clearly defined channels exist, including formal, confidential, and anonymous options.	Map all reporting channels; communicate availability through intranet, handbooks, and onboarding materials.
Trusted Points of Contact	HR or managers handling reports are not formally trained; trust is low.	Designated HR staff and managers are trained in handling gender-based complaints and maintain confidentiality.	Identify trusted contacts; provide mandatory training; ensure employees know who they can approach safely.
Guidance and Process Transparency	Employees lack guidance on how to report, what happens next, or expected timelines.	Step-by-step written guidance is available, including process flow, timelines, and responsibilities.	Publish guidance documents; include FAQs; provide clear examples of process from report to resolution.
Confidentiality and Non-Retaliation	Policies may exist but are not explicit; employees fear retaliation.	Explicit assurances of confidentiality and non-retaliation are communicated and consistently enforced.	Include anti-retaliation clauses in HR policies; reiterate in training; monitor compliance and enforce protections.

Core Principles for Safe Reporting

Safe reporting systems are underpinned by shared principles aligned with organisational values:

- Confidentiality: Information is handled on a need-to-know basis.
- Safety: Employees are protected from retaliation or negative consequences.
- Transparency: Processes and outcomes are communicated clearly.
- Timely response: Reports are acknowledged and addressed promptly.
- Empathy: Responses prioritise dignity, respect, and care for affected individuals.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Confidentiality	Reports are shared on a limited, ad hoc basis, exposing sensitive information.	Information is strictly handled on a need-to-know basis, with formal confidentiality protocols.	Train HR and managers on confidentiality; document handling procedures; and enforce strict need-to-know rules.
Safety	No formal protections; employees fear retaliation or negative consequences.	Policies and practices explicitly protect reporters from retaliation, isolation, or career harm.	Implement anti-retaliation measures; communicate protections widely; monitor and enforce compliance.
Transparency	Reporting processes and outcomes are unclear; employees lack visibility.	Processes and resolution outcomes are clearly communicated while maintaining confidentiality.	Publish process flows, timelines, and expected outcomes; provide updates to reporters; report anonymised trends organisation-wide.

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Timely Response	Reports may be delayed or ignored; follow-up is inconsistent.	Reports are acknowledged promptly, and responses follow a structured timeline.	Define service-level expectations for acknowledgment and resolution; track response times; adjust resources to meet standards.
Empathy and Respect	Employee concerns may be dismissed or handled impersonally.	All interactions prioritise dignity, care, and respectful treatment of affected individuals.	Train staff in empathetic communication; incorporate restorative approaches; provide support resources (e.g., counselling, mentoring).

From Principles to Practice: A Safe Reporting Mini-Protocol

A concise mini-protocol provides a shared understanding of how reports are handled, without overwhelming employees with legal or procedural detail. Core elements include:

- acknowledgment of reports within a defined timeframe;
- respectful, neutral handling of all parties;
- documentation of actions and decisions;
- clear communication about outcomes where possible;
- refer employees to internal or external support, such as counselling, ombudspersons, or legal guidance, particularly in cases of sexual harassment or gender-based violence.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Acknowledgement of Reports	Reports may not be formally acknowledged; employees are uncertain if action will be taken.	All reports are acknowledged within a defined timeframe, providing reassurance to the reporter.	Define acknowledgment timelines; automate confirmation emails; track compliance with acknowledgment standards.
Respectful and Neutral Handling	Handling of reports may be inconsistent or influenced by bias; parties may feel unfairly treated.	Reports are handled impartially, respectfully, and consistently across all cases.	Train HR and managers in neutral investigation techniques; establish standard procedures for all cases.
Documentation of Actions and Decisions	Actions and decisions are recorded inconsistently or informally, risking miscommunication or legal exposure.	All actions, decisions, and communications are systematically documented for accountability.	Maintain central case logs; use standardised forms; audit documentation regularly.
Clear Communication of Outcomes	Outcomes may not be communicated; employees are left uncertain about resolution.	Wherever possible, outcomes are communicated clearly, while respecting confidentiality.	Develop templates for outcome communication; provide guidance on what can be shared; ensure timely updates.
Referral to Support Services	Employees may not be informed of available internal or external support.	Employees are referred to appropriate support services, including counselling, ombudspersons, or legal guidance.	Maintain updated resource lists; proactively offer support options; follow up to confirm access and satisfaction.

Reporting as Part of Organisational Culture

Reporting mechanisms are effective only when embedded in a culture of trust, accountability, and gender awareness. HR teams strengthen this culture by:

- Modelling respectful, proportionate responses to concerns.
- Supporting managers in handling sensitive gender-related issues appropriately.
- Monitoring patterns of reporting to identify systemic risks or hotspots of misconduct.
- Regularly reviewing reporting mechanisms for accessibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness.

In male-dominated cybersecurity teams, trusted reporting mechanisms are essential to protect women and other underrepresented groups, ensure equitable participation, and prevent loss of talent. Organisations with effective reporting and response systems reduce harassment, enhance psychological safety, and strengthen overall resilience.

Top HR Actions:

- Implement gender-sensitive reporting channels, including anonymous or third-party options.
- Train HR staff and managers to recognise and respond to sexual harassment and gender bias.
- Regularly monitor and analyse reports by gender to identify trends and prevent recurrence.

- Communicate clearly about reporting procedures and reinforce zero-tolerance policies for harassment.
- Link reporting follow-ups to organisational accountability and leadership performance metrics.

Organisations can strengthen credibility by applying a maturity framework:

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Integration with Organisational Culture	Reporting mechanisms exist but are treated as compliance tasks; limited connection to values or culture.	Reporting is embedded in organisational culture, reinforcing trust, accountability, and gender awareness.	Communicate reporting as a core value; integrate into onboarding and leadership training; model respectful handling of concerns.
Managerial Support and Responsiveness	Managers may be unsure how to handle sensitive cases; inconsistent responses.	Managers are trained to respond appropriately to gender-related issues and support HR in safe reporting.	Provide mandatory training on gender-sensitive handling; offer guidance and coaching for managers; review manager responses periodically.
Monitoring and Analysis	Patterns of reporting are not tracked; systemic risks or hotspots may go unnoticed.	Reports are systematically monitored, analysed by gender, and used to identify trends or systemic issues.	Track reports by type, department, and demographics; analyse trends; implement preventive actions where needed.

DIMENSION	MINIMUM STANDARD	ADVANCED STANDARD	TOP ACTIONS (CTA)
Accessibility and Communication	Employees may not know how or when to report; channels may be unclear.	Reporting channels are accessible, well-communicated, and include anonymous/third-party options; procedures are transparent.	Regularly publicise reporting channels; update guidance documents; provide multiple access points for employees.
Linkage to Accountability and Leadership	Follow-up may not affect organisational accountability; leadership is not held responsible for response quality.	Reporting outcomes are linked to leadership accountability, performance metrics, and organisational decision-making.	Include reporting follow-up in performance reviews; report anonymised trends to boards or senior management; enforce zero-tolerance policies consistently.

Annexes

Annex 10 – Values Compass

Annex 11 – Practical Checklist: Minimum Standards for Reporting Mechanisms

Annex 12 – Safe Reporting Mini-Protocol

Annex 13 – Case Cards

Conclusion and Call to Action

Building gender-sensitive HR practices in cybersecurity organisations is a continuous process that requires consistency, accountability and intentional action across the entire employment lifecycle. Policies and frameworks create important foundations, but meaningful impact depends on how they are applied in everyday decisions, interactions and systems.

This Toolkit has shown how organisational culture, recruitment and job design, progression and leadership pathways, and safe reporting mechanisms are interconnected. Addressing these areas in isolation is rarely effective. When approached together, they enable organisations to reduce structural barriers, strengthen trust and create conditions in which diverse talent can enter, progress and thrive.

The annexes that follow are designed to support this work in practice. They offer concrete tools for reflection, assessment and implementation, helping HR teams and leaders translate insight into action and embed inclusive practices in a structured and sustainable way.

Introduction to the Annexes

The Annexes form an integral part of this Toolkit. They provide practical tools, templates, case cards and reference materials that support the application of gender-sensitive HR practices in cybersecurity organisations.

While the main sections of the Toolkit focus on concepts, frameworks and guidance, the Annexes offer hands-on resources that HR teams can adapt to their organisational context. These materials are designed to support reflection, internal discussion and evidence-based decision-making, without prescribing a single approach.

The tools included in the Annexes may be used independently or in combination, depending on organisational needs, size and level of HR maturity.

- Annex 1** Organisational Culture Self-Assessment Checklist
- Annex 2** Practical Checklist: Employer Branding, ESG and Inclusion
- Annex 3** How HR Policies Contribute to ESG Goals

- Annex 4** Practical Checklist: Identifying Micro-Biases in HR Decision-Making
- Annex 5** Consolidated List of Common Micro-Biases
- Annex 6** Inclusive Job Advertisement Template
- Annex 7** Job Advertisement Review Tool
- Annex 8** Job Classification and Title Review Template
- Annex 9** Case Cards: Progression and Leadership Pathways
- Annex 10** Values Compass
- Annex 11** Practical Checklist: Minimum Standards for Reporting Mechanisms
- Annex 12** Safe Reporting Mini-Protocol
- Annex 13** Case Cards

Annex 1

Organisational Culture Self-Assessment Checklist

This checklist helps HR teams assess whether everyday practices align with stated organisational values. It is intended as a reflective and actionable tool, not a formal audit.

How to use this checklist:

- // Organise a team meeting or workshop with HR staff and relevant managers.
- // Go through each question together and discuss what currently works well and where gaps may exist.
- // Optionally, complement the discussion with an anonymous employee survey to gather broader perspectives.
- // Use the combined insights to identify priorities for action and track improvements over time.

CHECKLIST

Leadership and Behaviour

- ☐ Do leaders model respectful and inclusive behaviour?
- ☐ Are behavioural expectations clearly communicated and consistently applied?

Decision-Making and Fairness

- ☐ Are decisions based on transparent and defined criteria?
- ☐ Are similar cases handled consistently across teams?

Participation and Voice

- ☐ Do employees feel able to express differing views?
- ☐ Are meetings and decision-making spaces accessible to relevant staff?

Work Practices and Expectations

- ☐ Are expectations around availability and flexibility applied consistently?
- ☐ Are operational demands balanced with employee well-being?

Psychological Safety and Trust

- ☐ Do employees feel safe raising concerns without fear of retaliation?
- ☐ Is confidentiality respected in practice?

Annex 2

Practical Checklist: Employer Branding, ESG and Inclusion

HR teams may use the following checklist to assess alignment between internal practice and external communication:

- ☐ Do public statements accurately reflect current HR policies and practices?
- ☐ Are claims about inclusion supported by concrete processes or examples?
- ☐ Is language used in external communication inclusive and role-focused?
- ☐ Are learning, development and progression opportunities clearly communicated?
- ☐ Are reporting mechanisms and employee protections visible?
- ☐ Are HR and communications teams aligned before publishing materials?
- ☐ Is employer branding reviewed periodically for accuracy and relevance?

Annex 3

ASPECT	WHAT IT MEANS IN PRACTICE	RELATED ESG INDICATOR
Gender balance in leadership	Equal representation of women and men in managerial positions; transparent promotion criteria.	Share of women in management
Flexible work models	Work-life balance, mental health care, and employee well-being.	Employee well-being index Work-life balance policies
Mentorship and talent development	Systematic investment in professional growth, especially among underrepresented groups.	Employee training & development hours Diversity & inclusion programs
Safe working environment	Prevention of harassment, reporting mechanisms, and confidential contact points.	Anti-harassment and equal opportunity policies

Annex 4

Practical Checklist: Identifying Micro-Biases in HR Decision-Making

HR teams may use the following questions as a reflective tool during routine HR processes:

- ☐ Are criteria for recruitment, evaluation and promotion clearly defined and consistently applied?
- ☐ Are assumptions about availability or working style influencing decisions?
- ☐ Are informal norms outweighing formal policies?
- ☐ Who is offered visibility, development opportunities and leadership exposure?
- ☐ How is feedback framed across different employees?
- ☐ How are concerns or complaints received and documented?

Regular use of such questions helps surface patterns that may otherwise remain invisible.

Annex 5

Consolidated List of Common Micro-Biases

RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

- Affinity bias** – preferring candidates who resemble us (in gender, education, experience, communication style).
 Example: “She reminds me of myself when I was starting out — she’ll definitely fit in.”
- Confirmation bias** – during interviews, we look for evidence that confirms an already formed opinion.
 Example: If we assume women are “less technical,” we ask them more questions about “soft skills.”
- Gendered language bias** – using masculine-coded language in job ads (“aggressive,” “dominant,” “born leader”).
 Consequence: Women apply less frequently because they don’t see themselves reflected in the description.
- Maternal bias** – assuming that mothers are less committed to work, while men who are fathers are “more responsible.”
 Example: “She probably won’t want extra projects — she has a small child.”
- Halo effect** – one positive trait overshadows an objective assessment (e.g., prestigious university, fluent English).

RETENTION AND PROMOTION

- Performance bias** – women’s success is more often attributed to teamwork, while men’s is more often attributed to individual talent.
 Example: “She has a great team behind her.” vs. “He’s a brilliant strategist.”

- Prove-it-again bias** – women have to prove their competence multiple times before being recognized as experts.
 Example: A male colleague is promoted after one successful project, while a woman must repeatedly demonstrate results.
- Likeability bias** – ambitious women are perceived as “difficult” or “aggressive,” while men with the same traits are seen as “assertive.”
 Example: “She’s too direct.” vs. “He knows what he wants.”
- Availability bias** – managers tend to assign tasks or promotions to those who are “more visible” (more present in meetings, less likely to be on parental leave or working in hybrid roles).
- Attribution bias** – men’s successes are attributed to ability, women’s to luck or team support.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

- Interrupting bias** – women are interrupted more often during discussions; their ideas may be ignored until repeated by men.
- Credit bias** – women’s contributions are less frequently recognized or are attributed to others.
 Example: “It was a team effort.”
- Emotional bias** – women’s emotions are interpreted as weakness, men’s as passion or determination.
- Role-congruity bias** – the assumption that women are “naturally better” in HR, communications, and support roles, while men belong in IT, cybersecurity, and analytics.
- Networking bias** – informal networks of influence (dinners, sports events) often exclude women from key decision-making spaces.

Illustrative examples supporting the identification of micro-bias patterns

SITUATION / PATTERN	HOW IT MANIFESTS	POSSIBLE SOLUTION
Women are interrupted less often but are rarely asked technical questions.	Women are interrupted less often, but they are not asked technical questions, which can limit their opportunities to demonstrate skills and expertise.	Introduce standardized interview questions.
In meetings, men speak more often, while women take meeting notes.	Gender stereotypes about “organisation” influence perceptions.	Rotate meeting roles regularly.
Comments about appearance during evaluations (“She’s always well-dressed and professional...”).	Focus shifts from competence to appearance.	Make performance and results the core evaluation criteria.
Working mothers are excluded from “intensive projects.”	Assumptions that women lack time or energy.	Ask for preferences instead of making assumptions.
Women in technical roles are more often addressed by first name, while men are addressed by title.	Women in technical roles are more often addressed by first name, while men are addressed by title, which can affect perceived authority and professional status.	Use consistent titles for everyone.
Meetings are scheduled late in the afternoon.	Subtly excludes parents and caregivers.	Establish “core hours” for meetings.

Annex 6

Recruitment and Job Design Template

Inclusive Job Design and Advertisement Review Checklist

Use this checklist to review job descriptions and job advertisements before publication.

Role and Title

- ☐ Is the role's purpose clearly explained?
- ☐ Does the job title accurately reflect the level of responsibility and seniority?
- ☐ Is this title used consistently for similar roles across the organisation?

Responsibilities

- ☐ Are key tasks clearly described and realistic?
- ☐ Does the scope of responsibilities match the job title and grade?
- ☐ Are expectations clear without overstating pressure or urgency?

Requirements

- ☐ Are essential requirements clearly separated from desirable ones?
- ☐ Are requirements limited to what is genuinely necessary for the role?
- ☐ Is equivalent experience accepted where appropriate?

Language and Tone

- ☐ Is the language role-focused rather than personality-focused?

- ☐ Have gender-coded or vague descriptors been avoided?
- ☐ Is the tone professional, clear and neutral?

Working Arrangements

- ☐ Are working hours or on-call expectations clearly explained?
- ☐ Is it clear how additional hours or crisis work are organised or compensated?
- ☐ Are flexible arrangements mentioned where relevant?

Development and Inclusion

- ☐ Are learning or development opportunities mentioned where appropriate?
- ☐ Is there a clear statement of commitment to fair and inclusive recruitment?
- ☐ Does the advertisement encourage a diverse range of applicants?

Final Check

- ☐ Would a qualified candidate clearly understand the role and expectations?
- ☐ Does this advertisement reflect the organisation's values and HR practices?

How to Use: This checklist is intended as a quick quality check, not a compliance exercise. HR teams are encouraged to review job advertisements collaboratively with hiring managers to identify and remove unnecessary barriers to entry.

Annex 7

Job Advertisement Review Tool

Examples of micro-biases in job advertisements

PROBLEM	EXAMPLE PHRASE	INCLUSIVE ALTERNATIVE
Masculine tone	A dynamic leader who can work under pressure.	A person who takes initiative and effectively handles challenges.
Invisibility of women	We are looking for an experienced engineer with five years of experience.	We encourage applications from individuals with at least 5 years of engineering expertise.
Implicit bias	An ideal person who fits into our team of young professionals.	A person who contributes to the diversity of the team.

Annex 8

Job Classification and Title Review Template

Example of job classification

ELEMENT	ORIGINAL JOB ADVERTISEMENT	REVISED GENDER-SENSITIVE VERSION
Job Title	Cybersecurity Analyst	Cybersecurity Analyst
Reporting Line	Reports to: Head of Cybersecurity Department	Reports to: Head of Cybersecurity Department
Role Purpose	Not explicitly defined	Supports the organisation’s information security by monitoring systems, responding to incidents, and contributing to risk prevention and mitigation.
Key Responsibilities	Monitors network systems and identifies potential security threats. Responds to incidents and participates in forensic investigations. Prepares risk assessment reports and proposes technical solutions for prevention. Maintains contact with external partners and institutions to exchange information on security incidents. Participates in implementing information security policies. Works outside regular hours when necessary, particularly in crises. Works outside regular hours when necessary, particularly in crises.	Monitor network systems and identify potential security threats. Respond to security incidents and contribute to forensic investigations in line with defined procedures. Prepare risk assessment reports and contribute to developing technical prevention measures. Liaise with relevant internal and external stakeholders on security-related matters, as required. Support the implementation and continuous improvement of information security policies. Participate in on-call or incident response arrangements as defined by the organisation, with appropriate compensation or time-off in lieu.
Education	University degree in a technical field (computer science, electrical engineering, IT).	University degree in a relevant technical field (e.g. computer science, IT, engineering) or equivalent professional experience.
Experience	Minimum of 3 years of experience in IT security.	Minimum of 3 years of relevant experience in IT or information security.
Technical Skills	Advanced knowledge of network technologies, operating systems, and threat detection tools.	Solid knowledge of network technologies, operating systems and security monitoring or threat detection tools.
Personal Attributes	Ability to react quickly in stressful situations. Strong analytical skills, precision, and dedication to work.	Ability to analyse security incidents and prioritise tasks in line with organisational procedures. Strong analytical and problem-solving skills.
Certifications	Preference will be given to candidates who hold relevant certificates (e.g., CEH, CISSP).	Relevant certifications (e.g. CEH, CISSP) are desirable and may be supported through professional development
Team Context	Experience working in dynamic teams.	Ability to work effectively within multidisciplinary teams.
Working Arrangements	Not specified beyond availability	Working arrangements, including on-call duties or flexible options, are communicated transparently and applied consistently.
Inclusion Statement	Not included	The organisation is committed to fair and inclusive recruitment and encourages applications from candidates with diverse backgrounds.

Annex 9

Case Cards: Progression and Leadership Pathways

Case Card: Support during maternity/paternity leave and career continuity

Focus

Systemic barriers that “pause” the careers of working parents, leading to loss of positions, projects, or promotion opportunities.

Guide

- // Identify which policies already exist (e.g., maternity, paternity, parental leave, flexible return-to-work arrangements).
- // Discuss how these policies are actually applied in practice: do employees know about them, use them, and feel supported? Are there informal barriers or stigma?
- // Reflect on how the system “waits” for returning employees: is there a reintegration plan, regular contact, mentoring, or a gradual return, or are people expected to “catch up” on their own?

Questions

- // Do returning employees receive a formal return-to-work plan?
- // Do fathers take parental leave, or is it still seen as a “women’s issue”?
- // How could we formalize support for returnees within the next 90 days?

Examples of possible measures

- // Establish a formal Return-to-Work Plan with a mentor assigned to each returning employee.

- // Communicate and actively promote the paternity leave policy.

Case Card: Balance and visibility

Participation in projects, meetings, flexible work, and equal access to opportunities, especially for employees who use flexible arrangements or have family responsibilities.

Focus

Informal patterns that influence perceptions of commitment, participation in meetings, and access to key projects.

Guide

- // Assess how widely available and accepted flexible work arrangements (hybrid work, flexible hours) are in your organisation.
- // Discuss perceptions of visibility: are flexible workers (especially women and parents) seen as less dedicated?
- // Write down which rules exist “on paper” but are not practiced consistently.

Questions

- // Are all employees invited to important meetings and informal gatherings?
- // How are results evaluated - by quality or visibility?
- // What small changes could increase equality, such as setting “core hours” for meetings (10:00–15:00)

Case Card: Leadership development system for women

Mentorship, sponsorship, and fair criteria

Focus

Formal and informal mechanisms that enable (or hinder) women and young professionals from getting opportunities to lead teams.

Guide

- // Map existing practices (mentoring programs, training opportunities, career conversations).
- // Analyze who has access to sponsorship. Do managers actively advocate for candidates, or does it depend on personal networks?
- // Discuss promotion criteria: are they clearly defined and communicated to everyone?

Questions

- // How are future leaders selected: by performance, visibility, or personal recommendations?
- // Do women have equal access to leadership training programs?
- // How can we ensure gender balance among mentors and mentees?

Examples of possible measures

- // Formalize a mentoring program with gender-balanced mentor–mentee pairs.
- // Publish clear promotion and performance evaluation criteria.
- // Introduce a “double pairing” mentorship model — one male and one female mentor per candidate.

Annex 10

Values Compass

The Values Compass is a reflective tool designed to help HR and management teams examine how core organisational values translate into everyday behaviour. It is particularly useful as a foundation for discussions on reporting mechanisms and workplace conduct.

VALUE	MEANING IN PRACTICE	REFLECTION QUESTION
Confidentiality	Information is shared only with those directly involved in resolving the case.	Who in my organisation would I feel safe confiding in about a sensitive issue?
Safety	Employees are protected, not penalised, when they raise concerns in good faith.	Would someone from my team feel able to report if they witnessed unfair treatment?
Transparency	Reporting processes and outcomes are clearly explained and accessible.	How clear are our procedures to all employees?
Timely Response	Concerns are acknowledged and addressed within a reasonable timeframe.	What would a timely and fair response look like in our context?
Empathy	Responses prioritise dignity and care, not just procedural compliance.	How do we show that we care about people, not only processes?

Annex 11

Practical Checklist: Minimum Standards for Reporting Mechanisms

- ☐ Are reporting channels clearly defined and accessible?
- ☐ Do employees understand what can be reported and how?
- ☐ Are confidentiality and non-retaliation principles clearly communicated?
- ☐ Are response timelines defined and followed?
- ☐ Are those handling reports trained and supported?
- ☐ Is information about reporting reviewed and updated regularly?

Annex 12

Safe Reporting Mini-Protocol

Example of mini- protocol: Safe reporting of workplace harassment

STEP	DESCRIPTION – WHAT HAPPENS	WHO IS RESPONSIBLE	WHEN/TIMEFRAME	HOW IT IS IMPLEMENTED
1. Incident Report	Any employee may report an incident of harassment, inappropriate comment, or discrimination — anonymously or in person.	Employee/Witness	Immediately after the incident (no later than 48h)	By completing an online form or contacting HR/the designated confidential person directly.
2. Initial Assessment	The confidential person or HR reviews the report and assesses whether immediate action is required.	HR/Confidential person	Within 72h of receiving the report	Short interview with the reporter and verification of key facts.
3. Protection of the Reporter	A temporary protection measure is activated if there is a risk of retaliation or discomfort.	HR/Line manager	Immediately after assessment	Temporary reassignment, identity protection, or mentorship/peer support.
4. Investigation and Interviews	An independent person (HR, legal counsel, or external expert) conducts interviews with all parties involved.	HR/Ethics Committee	Within 10 working days	Confidential documentation of statements and fair treatment of all parties.
5. Decision and Feedback	A decision is made on corrective actions (warning, training, disciplinary action).	HR/Management	Within 15 working days	The reporter receives outcome feedback and additional support if needed.
6. Follow-up and Prevention	Case evaluation and prevention measures are proposed.	HR/Team leader	After 30 days	Brief follow-up discussion and a summary report to the Ethics Committee.

Annex 13

Case Cards

Case card: Microaggression Toward A New Female Colleague

Scenario: During a team meeting, a female colleague proposes a technical solution. Moments later, another team member repeats the same idea in different words. The manager reacts: “Excellent, that’s a great idea, Damir!” This happens repeatedly. The colleague notices her ideas are rarely acknowledged unless someone else repeats them, leading to withdrawal and disengagement.

Analysis

- // Type of microaggression: invalidation, dismissing, or reattributing credit.
- // Effect: feeling invisible, loss of motivation/confidence.
- // Systemic cause: lack of meeting structure, leader inaction, and unaddressed bias.

Discussion questions

- // How might the colleague feel after this experience?
- // In your organisation, could someone intervene — and who?
- // What could the manager do differently in real time?
- // What could HR or leadership do to prevent recurrence?
- // How can the system — not just individuals — show that it values all contributions?

Guiding checklist

Recognition: Are contributions documented (e.g., meeting minutes, idea tracker)?; Do leaders receive training on bias in facilitation and communication?; Are teams encouraged to ensure equal

participation?

Reaction: Can managers address it at the moment (e.g., “Thanks, Damir — I think Alma just mentioned that idea, let’s explore her point further”)?; Is there a safe channel (HR partner or confidential focal point) to report recurring patterns?; Does HR track feedback on visibility and inclusion?

Prevention: Meetings record the authors of ideas; Encourage “amplification culture”, colleagues highlight each other’s contributions; Build a feedback culture where managers ask for input on their inclusiveness.

Protocol:

- // Formal meeting minutes listing contributors.
- // Manager training on micro-bias and inclusive facilitation.
- // Promotion of “amplification” in meetings.
- // Confidential HR reporting option.
- // Quarterly mini-survey on perceived visibility and fairness.

Case card: Power Imbalance and Workplace Bullying

Scenario: A manager constantly interrupts a junior employee, assigns tasks late at night, and dominates discussions. The employee reports the issue to HR but fears losing their job since they are on probation.

Task: Design a mechanism that enables safe, fast reporting while protecting the employee.

Guiding checklist

Recognition: Does the policy define “power imbalance” (superior–subordinate relationship)? Are there anonymous or alternative reporting channels separate from the manager? Is there a defined response timeframe (e.g., 72 hours)?

Reaction: Must HR inform senior management or the ethics committee? Are there temporary protection measures (e.g. team reassignment during investigation)? Is there an explicit anti-retaliation clause?

Prevention: Are managers trained on power boundaries and respectful communication? Is there a peer-support or mentoring network for vulnerable staff?

Protocol:

- /// The complaint is submitted confidentially.
- /// HR and the compliance officer respond within 72 hours.
- /// Temporary protective measures are applied.
- /// Following the investigation, mandatory coaching for the manager is implemented.

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