



► Fact sheet

May 14, 2026

Closing gender gaps in vocational training

Good practices of the National Training Institute (INA) of Costa Rica¹

Main points

- The experience of the National Training Institute (INA) of Costa Rica shows how it is possible to integrate gender perspectives and close gender gaps between men and women in skills development, based on an institutional process sustained since 2013.
- Among the main actions of the INA are the implementation of its Gender Equality Policy, initiatives to promote the participation of women in STEAM through financial aid and obtaining gender equality certifications at the national and international level.

Background

Since its creation in 1965, through Decree No. 3506, the National Training Institute (INA) has played a key role in skills development in Costa Rica. For over five decades, it has promoted technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in all economic sectors, contributing to reducing socioeconomic gaps and improving living and working conditions (INA, 2024).

In this context, the INA has positioned gender equality as a strategic pillar of its institutional management, through actions aimed at guaranteeing equal opportunities

between women and men, led by the Advisory Office for Gender Equality and Equity (APIEG).

Gender equality in vocational training

Prioritising gender equality in TVET and in the labour market is essential to promote equitable conditions for access, retention, and graduation, as well as promoting the equitable employment of women and men in high-demand sectors. However, structural barriers persist—such as occupational segregation, gender stereotypes, and the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities— which often limit women's full

¹Article written by:

Orietta Zamora Rodríguez, Advisory Office for Gender Equality and Equity, National Learning Institute (INA);

Rodrigo Mogrovejo Monasterios, Specialist in Sustainable Enterprises, Skills and Just Transition, ILO Office for Central America, Panama and the Dominican Republic.

participation, especially in technical and technological fields.

Addressing these gaps requires institutional policies that promote equal opportunities, work-life balance, equal pay, and the prevention of violence and harassment in training and work environments. Incorporating comprehensive approaches that integrate a gender perspective into vocational training is key to moving towards more inclusive and efficient labour markets.

Evidence shows that countries that promote active gender equality policies register higher levels of female participation in the workforce and better results in terms of economic and social development (ILO, 2019).

Furthermore, gender equality is a central element of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly through Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which aims to ensure gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (United Nations, 2015).

Persistence of gender gaps in vocational training in Costa Rica

The gender gap analysis conducted by the INA as part of the formulation of its Gender Equality Policy in 2013, with technical support from the International Labour Organization (ILO), revealed significant occupational segregation in vocational training. This was characterized by the higher concentration of women in traditionally female-dominated fields and their limited participation in STEM fields (INA, 2013). This analysis is anchored in a national context where female labour force participation remained significantly lower than male participation, reflecting structural gaps in access to employment and in the distribution of job opportunities (INEC, 2013).

More than a decade later, the updated diagnosis in 2024 confirms the persistence of these gaps. A more detailed analysis is presented in subsequent sections. Although women represent 56.5 percent of total TVET enrolment, their participation remains significantly lower in technical and high-demand fields, limiting their integration into the labour market and access to better employment opportunities (INA, 2024).

These results show that, despite progress in access to vocational training, structural challenges persist related to occupational segregation, gender stereotypes, and the unequal distribution of care responsibilities, reinforcing the need to continue strengthening institutional policies aimed at promoting gender equality in vocational training.

Advisory Office for Gender Equality and Equity: institutionalization of the gender approach

The development of gender equality policies in INA is framed within the evolution of international instruments on women's rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women (Belém do Pará, 1994) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), which establish obligations to eliminate discrimination against women and promote equality.

At the national level, this framework is complemented by the Law for the Promotion of Social Equality for Women (No. 7142), which establishes the obligation of the State and its institutions to promote active policies aimed at guaranteeing equality between women and men. Article 19 mandates the INA to develop a vocational training system focused on the comprehensive training of women, providing the legal and institutional support to support progress in this area (INA, 2016).

In this context, the INA progressively developed a specialized institutional structure, which evolved from the Vocational Training Program for Women to the Department of Vocational Training for Women, until it was consolidated in 2012 as the Advisory Office for Gender Equality and Equity (APIEG), expanding its scope towards a comprehensive institutional approach (INA, 2024). This body constitutes a unique case at the national level, as it is supported by a legal mandate.

The origins of this evolution can be traced back to the 1980s, when limited participation of women was identified in technical areas such as materials technology, vehicle mechanics, metal construction, fisheries and maritime activities and electricity, which highlighted the need to implement specific actions to promote their inclusion in traditionally male-dominated sectors.

Currently, APIEG is leading the mainstreaming of the gender equality approach in institutional processes, services, and policies, promoting equitable access, retention, and graduation rates in vocational training, as well as gender equal conditions for public employees. It is also driving the integration of this approach into the institutional management model as a cross-cutting principle aimed at closing structural gaps in the labour market (INA, 2025).

The existence of this specialized technical body allows not only compliance with the current regulatory framework, but also the implementation of concrete actions aimed at reducing gender gaps in access to technical training, especially in areas of higher labour demand.

Towards a gender equality policy at the INA

As part of efforts to close gender gaps, in 2010 APIEG requested technical and financial support from the ILO for the design of the first Gender Equality Policy at INA(PIGINA) and its action plan. This process enabled the development of an institutional diagnosis of gender gaps and the subsequent design of the policy.

The development of these instruments was carried out by the organization CEFEMINA (Feminist Centre for Information and Action), with technical advice and logistical support from APIEG and the National Institute of Women (INAMU).

The process culminated in the approval of the Institutional Gender Equality Policy by the INA Board of Directors on January 21, 2013. This policy established the institutional commitment to promote equality between women and men by mainstreaming the gender perspective in the vocational training system, within the framework of human rights and national development (INA, 2013). Its objective was to strengthen the INA's role as an agent of change, promoting the equitable participation of women and men in vocational training and the labour market, especially in STEAM fields (INA, 2013).

Policy implementation and monitoring mechanisms

To implement the policy, the First Action Plan for the period 2013–2017 was established, focused on closing gender gaps. Institutional monitoring and evaluation mechanisms were also developed, including the System of Indicators on the State of Gender Equality at INA (SIGINA) and the System of Indicators for Monitoring the Gender Equality Policy (SISPIGINA) (INA, 2013). Similarly, the Institutional Commission for the Gender Equality Policy (CIPIEG) was formed, the body responsible for monitoring implementation, ensuring its technical and administrative feasibility, and strengthening institutional decision-making in this area.

As part of institutional strengthening, the INA has developed research on perceptions, attitudes, practices

and knowledge related to violence and discrimination, with studies carried out in 2019 and 2023, which have contributed to strengthening institutional decision-making and the design of more effective interventions.

Actions for the inclusion of women in vocational training

As part of the policy implementation, the INA has developed various initiatives aimed at promoting women's participation in high-demand sectors. These include the "Breaking Molds" and "Open Doors" fairs, which seek to highlight training opportunities in traditionally male-dominated fields through hands-on experiences in specialties such as automotive mechanics, electricity, metalworking, and materials technology. Currently, a Strategy for the Entry, Retention, and Graduation of Women in High-Demand and Gender-Asymmetric Areas, including STEAM fields, has been designed at INA.

In addition, vocational guidance initiatives have been implemented through student welfare teams, together with activities designed to support women's retention in training programmes. These include meetings for women in male-dominated sectors and workshops focused on human rights, personal development, self-confidence and gender equality.

Prevention of violence and harassment, and support for women in vulnerable situations

The INA has developed institutional mechanisms for the prevention and elimination of violence and harassment, through specialized bodies such as the Prosecutor's Office for the prevention and care of Sexual Harassment, which provides legal advice, psychological support and awareness-raising actions in the regional units.

In addition, the Strategy for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women is being implemented, aimed at creating conditions that encourage women experiencing violence to remain in professional training programs. This strategy includes preventative actions, capacity-building processes, and economic support as a protective factor.

The target population for this strategy consists of women participating in vocational training services who are experiencing or have survived violence and who face vulnerable conditions that affect their well-being and their

participation in training (INA, 2022). It is currently being implemented in various regions of the country, including the Huetar Caribe, Huetar Norte, Brunca, Cartago, Heredia, and Central Pacific Regional Units.

These actions demonstrate a comprehensive approach that integrates policy design, evidence generation, the implementation of institutional mechanisms, and the development of specific interventions aimed at closing gender gaps. The INA's experience shows that the sustained integration of a gender perspective into vocational training requires not only expanding women's access but also creating conditions that promote their retention, employment, and advancement in high-demand sectors.

Analysis of structural gender gaps in the INA

With the expiration of the second action plan of the Gender Equality Policy, the Advisory Office for Gender Equality and Equity (APIEG) began developing a new gender gap assessment in 2024. This study was based on a detailed analysis of the structural factors that perpetuate inequality within the institution, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to offer a comprehensive view that allows for the design of informed and effective policies (INA, 2024).

One of the central aspects of the diagnosis was the evaluation of women's participation in high-demand occupations, such as science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM). The results show that, despite institutional efforts, barriers associated with occupational segregation and gender stereotypes persist, limiting women's access to and retention in these strategic sectors (INA, 2024).

Likewise, the diagnosis analysed the institutional culture of the INA in relation to the INTE G38-2-2021 Standard, identifying factors such as the unequal distribution of care responsibilities, which continues to disproportionately affect women, thus demonstrating the need to strengthen co-responsibility policies.

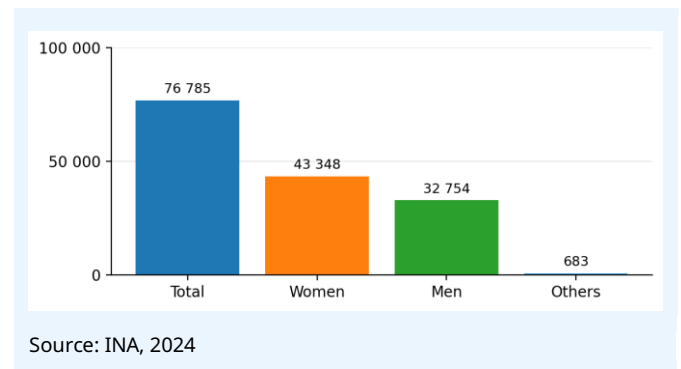
Results on internal staff and external reach

Internally, the results show a relatively balanced distribution of men and women among the institutional staff. However, significant differences persist by occupational level: men predominate in operational and

management positions, while women are concentrated in administrative and professional levels. Similarly, gaps are identified in the distribution by educational level, with a greater female presence at mid-level and higher levels of education, and a male predominance at lower levels and in doctoral studies. These findings demonstrate progress, but also areas for improvement in terms of equity in access to leadership positions.

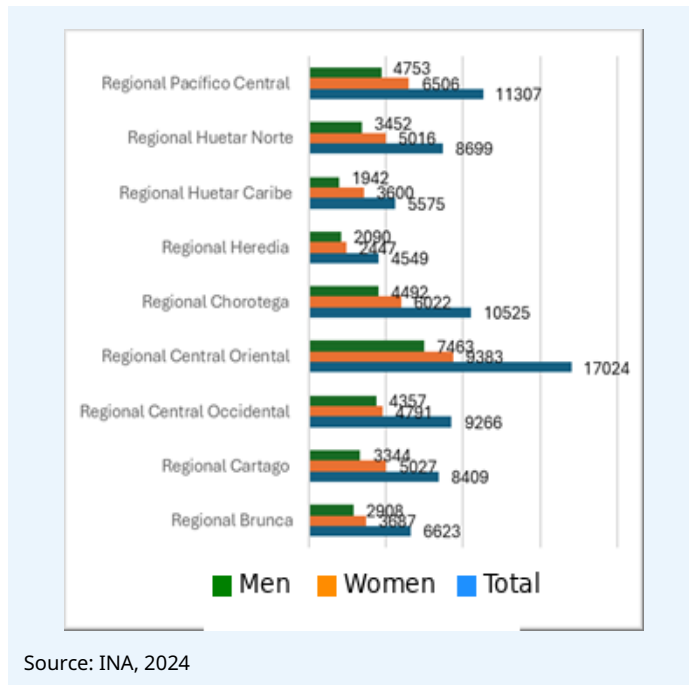
Regarding the external dimension, the results show that the INA's enrolment in 2024 reached a total of 76,785 people, of which 43,348 women (56.5 percent), 32,754 men (42.7 percent) and 683 "other" (INA, 2024).

► **Figure 1. General enrolment in various INA programs.**



However, eventual participation is not evenly distributed, as women are concentrated in sectors such as administration, health, languages, food production, and services, while men predominate in technical areas such as agriculture, electricity, and metalworking. This pattern demonstrates the persistence of strong horizontal segregation in vocational training.

► **Figure 2. Enrolment by region and sex.**



Furthermore, additional gaps are identified in the transition to the labour market, where the hiring of women in high-demand sectors remains limited, highlighting a disconnect between technical training and equitable employment opportunities. In this sense, the diagnosis confirms the persistence of occupational segregation.

Other relevant findings include limitations in access to connectivity —only 38.5 percent of students have high-speed internet, gaps in the distribution of care responsibilities —33 percent of women versus 15 percent of men, and differences in the experience of harassment and safety, where women report higher levels of vulnerability (INA, 2024).

Organizational culture and gender perceptions

The diagnosis also reveals that, although there is a widespread perception of equality within the institutional environment, practices and behaviours that reflect gender stereotypes persist. These include differing expectations regarding the roles of women and men, less recognition of women's skills in certain areas, and sexist comments or attitudes in the workplace.

These elements reflect that, beyond regulatory advances, cultural barriers persist that affect substantive equality within the institution.

Update to the gender equality policy at the INA

Once the diagnostic assessment was completed, APIEG again sought support from the ILO to design a second Gender Equality Policy. As a result, a new policy with a 12-year horizon (2026–2037) was formulated in 2025, accompanied by a four-year action plan (2026–2029) aimed at closing gaps through affirmative action and specific measures. It was adopted in April 2026.

This policy aims to guarantee equal conditions between women and men in the institutional management of the INA, promoting women's access, retention, leadership and labour market participation, with particular emphasis on those in situations of vulnerability or underrepresentation, as well as promoting gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours among men (INA, 2026).

It is structured around four strategic axes: strengthening organizational culture, women's economic autonomy, access to and retention in high-demand fields, and incorporation of the gender approach into the curriculum.

Implementation, results and recent progress

As part of its implementation, an action plan was designed with 37 indicators, as well as specific strategies to promote the participation of women in STEAM areas and sectors with high labour demand.

Among the recent advances, the creation of the INA Masculinities Network stands out, aimed at promoting reflection and training of men in gender equality.

In addition, INA obtained the gender equality certification scheme promoted by the National Institute of Women (INAMU) in 2025 and the certification of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the silver category.

That same year, INA graduated 963 women in STEAM fields, who received financial support totalling 865,565,081 colones, equivalent to 1.9 million US dollars.

Conclusions

The experience of the INA in Costa Rica demonstrates that closing gender gaps in vocational training requires a comprehensive and sustained approach that combines the development of regulatory frameworks, the creation of specialized institutional structures, the generation of

evidence, and the implementation of concrete actions aimed at both access to, retention in, and labour market integration for women.

It also highlights the importance of having monitoring mechanisms and information systems that allow for identifying gaps, tracking progress, and continuously adjusting interventions. The coordination between institutional policies, affirmative action, and specific strategies—such as financial support, career guidance, and violence prevention—has been key to advancing toward greater equality of opportunity.

However, the results of the most recent assessment show that structural challenges persist, particularly regarding women's participation in technical fields and their integration into sectors with high labour demand. This confirms that gender equality in vocational training is not achieved solely through access, but requires deeper transformations in the cultural, institutional, and labour market domains.

In this sense, the INA's experience offers relevant lessons for other vocational training systems in the region, demonstrating that the effective integration of the gender perspective requires long-term institutional commitment, inter-institutional coordination, and the adoption of approaches that simultaneously address the structural, cultural, and economic dimensions of inequality.

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Contact

International Labour Organization

ILO Office for Central America, Panama and the Dominican Republic, Sabanilla de Montes de Oca. From the UNED, 100 East, 150 Southwest San José, Costa Rica

T: (506) 2207 8700
E: sanjose@ilo.org