Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Gender-sensitive research funding procedures

Main Section   Videos & Webinars   Tools & Resources

Gender equality plans (GEPs) of research funding bodies should, on the one hand, address internal stakeholders and processes, similar to research-performing organisations (internal career development, internal decision-making and leadership, internal sexual harassment policies). On the other hand, external stakeholders and the whole funding cycle need to be addressed from a gender perspective. Allocating research grants needs to be done in a gender-sensitive and inclusive manner (read more in step 6, 'Gender budgeting ⧉'). Research funding bodies should implement a comprehensive gender strategy covering internal and external processes.

Research funding bodies can become active in all steps where (potential) applicants are addressed, reviewers and panel members are approached and guided, and applications are discussed, assessed and funded or rejected. Gender activities start when a programme or grant is designed, and all data should be analysed for a redesign of the grant programme after a call is finished.

Gendering the funding cycle

In the following text, **activities promoting gender equality are discussed on the basis of a typical funding programme / grant**. Following a cyclic model, gender may be relevant in the various steps of this funding cycle (see figure below), for example when funding programmes are designed, when panel members are selected or when criteria are specified. The following paragraph describes the different steps of the funding cycle and how gender equality needs to be taken into account in these steps.
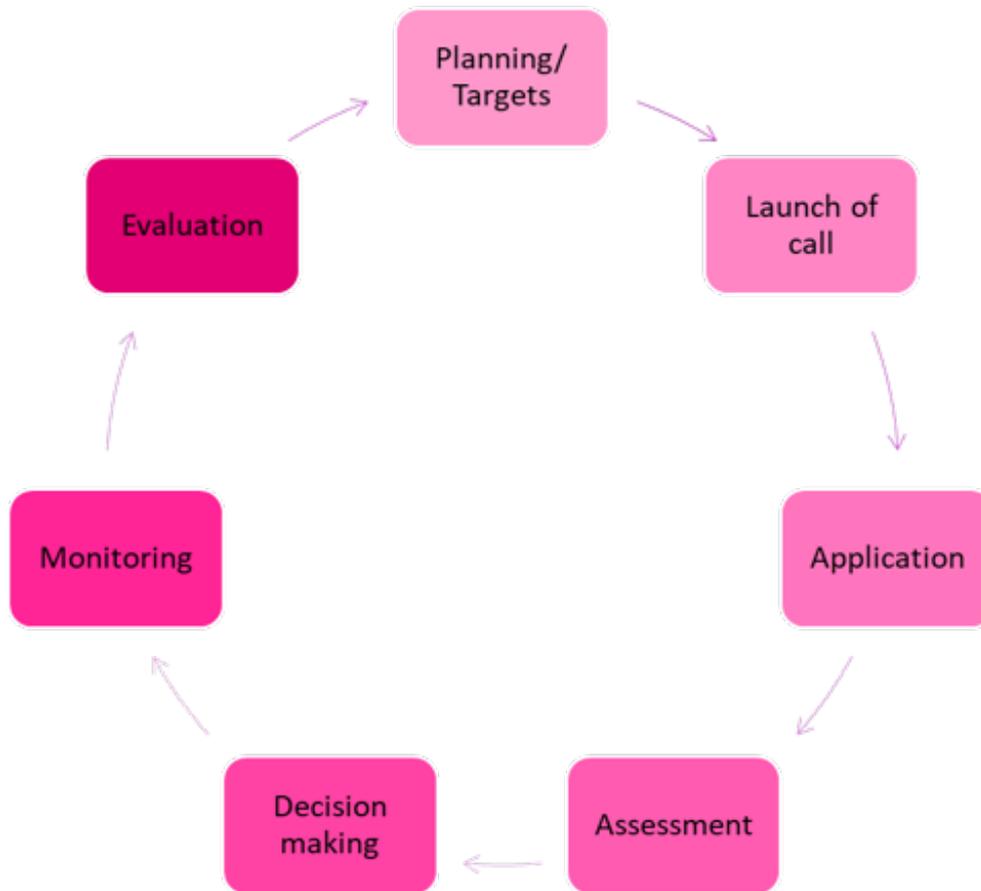
Figure: Funding cycle with gender relevance

Initiation phase: planning, status quo
In the initial phase, the programme management and all other relevant stakeholders start thinking about the objectives of the relevant call from a gender perspective.

Therefore, research funding bodies should collect statistical information on an annual basis (or on the previous call). Main areas to collect data on are the proportions of women and men among applicants and grantees, and the proportions of women and men on evaluation panels and among evaluators (by discipline, if relevant). As **the integration of the sex/gender dimension into research and innovation** (R & I) has become a funding principle in Horizon Europe, this should be requested in all funding programmes. Accordingly, specific data on the shares of funded and rejected applications integrating gender is needed (see also step 2 ⬀ of the step-by-step guide for research funding bodies).

At this point, funding bodies should be aware that, by defining programme targets and specifying funding conditions (eligibility and assessment criteria, assessment procedure, etc.), they have an impact on individual researchers' careers and on processes within research organisations, including universities.

This data should be made publicly available.

Launch of the call and composition of panels/ boards

This phase comprises the opening of the call and its advertising and promotion, and addresses applicants and their queries. In addition, the selection of reviewers and/or panel members takes place in this phase.

As numerous funding bodies aim to make their **funding programmes more attractive to women researchers**, gender-sensitive language and images are required. In addition, including an explicit statement on the commitment of the research funding body to promoting gender equality might encourage more women to apply. **Gender-proofing of call texts and contained images** can impact the number of women who feel encouraged to apply. This is why the call text and images should be checked for gender inclusiveness, particularly in highly competitive and prestigious grants/programmes. If the call is promoted on a website or in newsletters, avoid gender-stereotypic wording and images. When presenting the call, always include gender statistics and gender targets of the funding body.

To attract more women, ask yourself which channels for distributing your funding calls you are currently using and if there are any others available that might target more diverse pools of potential applicants.

In this phase, you also start looking for and **selecting reviewers and panel members**: Who carries out the evaluations is relevant to a gender-fair evaluation outcome, which is why having a guideline with clear selection criteria is highly recommended. In accordance with the European research area (ERA) target to increase the share of women in decision-making bodies, research funding bodies should aim for more gender balance on evaluation panels, for example a 40/60 % men/women quota could be introduced. Some research bodies have increased their efforts to create a **more diverse panel composition**, yet they have reported that it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit panel members. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that panels/boards are now (as of 2021) primarily meeting virtually may change the situation.

When recruiting reviewers and panel/board members, it is crucial to explicitly set out standards for a **conflict of interest**.

Application

This phase covers applications, submissions and eligibility checks.

Increasing the share of women applicants is a target for a large number of research funding bodies. While some research funding bodies address the pool of potential women applicants explicitly, either through 'ambassadors' such as the developmentEuropean Research Council ⧉ or through specific workshops informing on the call for women only (as carried out by Austrian Science Fund - FWF), sometimes staff members also approach gender networks or conferences to encourage women to apply for open grants. Science Foundation Ireland introduced a formal approach for increasing the number of women applicants and allowed a higher number of applications from one institution where women lead the projects: from each research funding body, men can lead a maximum of six projects; **if the project leaders are women**, six additional applications are possible.

A higher share of women in research teams can be achieved by asking all call applicants to indicate whether and how a **sex/gender analysis** is **integrated into their research** proposal (from the beginning) or explain why gender is not relevant to the proposed research. The benefits are twofold: on the one hand, these questions should attract more women to become members of research teams and, on the other hand, high-quality research outcomes can be expected, as the research questions are more tailored to different subgroups. Research funding bodies could offer awareness-raising activities and training for applicants to enable them to detect the gender relevance of their research and to conduct sex/gender analysis. The integration of the sex/gender dimension into research content is a strategy to enhance research excellence and to increase gender knowledge of researchers.

Support structures provided by research organisations play an increasing role in the application process. The smaller share of women applicants can also be attributed to 'self-selection': studies show that women tend to apply only when they assume that they have a good chance of succeeding (Ranga et al., 2012 ⧉). Research organisations might need to encourage women researchers more to apply and provide dedicated gender-sensitive support structures (training not on weekends or in the evening, avoiding travel, etc.). Individualised support within a grant was implemented by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF); for example, **mandatory mentoring** is part of each early stage programme: research, innovation and training (ESPRIT) application. The aim is to have a mentor 'assisting the principal investigator in their professional and personal career development ⧉'.

Possibilities to make **care obligations** in applications visible and to compensate for care are crucial elements of the eligibility check. Funding bodies can provide various forms of compensation ⧉, such as extending the period for applying (see the European Research Council), providing compensation for a care person (FWF) or introducing a supplemental discretionary allowance to enable funded research teams to provide a replacement for a team member going on maternity or adoptive leave. Be aware that reviewers need to know how to evaluate research performance in cases of non-linear career paths.

Assessment: criteria and process

The next step in the funding cycle is the assessment of the applications. In this regard, gender might play a role with respect to the organisation of the assessment process and the definition of assessment criteria, aiming for full transparency and openness. Raising the awareness of reviewers and/or panel members and chairs about the formal policies in place and how to put them into practice in a gender-sensitive manner contributes to gender-fair funding outcomes.

Assessment criteria

Implementing clear evaluation guidelines and precise assessment criteria guarantees an improved assessment process and minimises gender bias.

Eligibility criteria need to be gender-sensitive, for example by taking into account that researchers have a slower career progression due to time for caring or sabbaticals. To increase the gender awareness of the research community, your funding body should provide costs for capacity building, such as for gender training, gender coaching or mentoring.

Assessment criteria can, in themselves, be a potential factor for gender bias. Measuring the quality of researchers or their research on the basis of bibliometric, journal-based indicators has been heavily criticised from a gender perspective: women who have less time to publish, who have smaller networks and are therefore less likely to get invited to join collaborations or publications, or who are less cited will very likely also have a lower overall research performance. To counteract bias here, some funding bodies have limited the number of publications that can be listed in the application.

Excellence is at the core of assessing research and researchers, yet criteria to measure excellence are often vague. Excellence is related to the image of the 'ideal scientist', characterised by a linear career path, high-impact points and high self-confidence, relevant in particular for panel interviews. The Dutch funding body NWO has worked on the implementation of a broader and more diverse image of good science and a good scientist. For reviewers and panel members, a video ☒ was produced to reflect on the ideal image and to identify personal bias.

Other approaches to improve the ways in which researchers and research outputs are evaluated have been developed by the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA ☒). **Alternative assessment policies** and practices, such as narrative curriculum vitae (CVs), are increasingly applied by research funding bodies. A collection of good practices that illustrate various forms of alternative research and researcher assessment is available here ☒.

A narrative CV ⧉ takes into account a broader range of research outputs (papers, databases, policy briefings), not only publications and citations. Thus, applicants are asked not to reference their impact factor or h-index. Reviewers need to focus on the impact of the research in the field when considering publications and other research outputs. In the future, awareness will be needed of potential new gender equality challenges, for example what new biases the implementation of a narrative CV could bring about.

For **applicants with a non-traditional career path** or with caregiving responsibilities, a different assessment would be to look at the research ⧉ opportunity', which considers how a researcher's productivity and contribution throughout their career correspond to the opportunities that were available to them.

When asking for **the integration of the sex/gender dimension into research**, be aware that assessing the relevance of gender in proposals in various fields requires specific expertise. Reviewers therefore need specific training or a co-assessor with sound gender competence.

Remote reviewers are often kept out of the picture, as it is more difficult for research funding bodies to engage them and make them committed to the (gender equality) standards applied. This is why it is crucial to give clear instructions for how to do remote assessment. Research funding bodies are encouraged to find ways to increase the gender awareness of remote reviewers. One option to distinguish the assessment of the researcher and the proposed research is to first assess the proposal anonymously, and only then get access to the CV, which should be supported by the information technology infrastructure, for example by providing access to CVs only after the assessment of the research proposal was submitted.

Assessment process

In panel meetings, you should have a clear list of criteria to be discussed and make sure that the same criteria are applied to each applicant. This should be communicated explicitly in briefing meetings for reviewers and panel/board members.

The panel chair has an important role in guaranteeing that everyone plays by the same rules, and this also applies to gender equality. Here, the panel chair might encourage all members to reflect on gender and the share of women applicants in all steps of the assessment process.

To improve the assessment process, it is recommended to have constant gender equality observers, who are either external gender experts or specifically trained internal staff. They can evaluate and report whether and how gender bias is manifested in the discussion of proposals. Findings can then be integrated into the evaluation process (e.g. this has been practised by the Swedish Research Council ⤢ for a decade).

If panels meet physically, try to be careful with the seating arrangements: women and younger panel members should optimally sit close to the panel chair to encourage them to actively join the negotiations.

The language used in panels should be gender-inclusive; it is recommended to avoid names and pronouns that would indicate an applicant's gender.

Check if a double-blind review process is possible in order to mitigate bias.

Capacity building

To be able to improve the process and the assessment criteria from a gender-sensitive perspective, it is necessary to **raise awareness** among panel members and chairs before they start their work, for example by watching a video and answering questions. Taking reviewers' / panel members' limited time resources into account, a clear statement by the research body's management is required as to the **mandatory participation** in this gender training. You can find examples of awareness-raising activities and training for evaluators on unconscious bias in tab 2 'Videos and webinars'.

Decision-making

The phase of final decision-making covers different steps to find a final solution, such as internal triage/shortlisting, panel/interview assessment or re-ranking. Here, it makes a difference whether the final decision is taken by the panel or by a management body such as a scientific board.

Some research bodies apply a gender quota for women to be funded (e.g. at least 40 % or equal share of women grantees as share of women applicants). Science Foundation Ireland has recently introduced a tiebreaking approach, weighting pro-equality and preferring women applicants when they have equal scores as their men colleagues. This implies that gender needs to be taken into account in the negotiation and final decision-making process.

In addition, aiming for gender-balanced evaluation panels and other decision-making boards contributes to more gender inclusiveness. Again, it is important to provide gender awareness-raising activities for members of management and decision-making bodies.

Monitoring

Setting up a clear monitoring strategy and analysing all collected call data enables a research funding body to be informed about the progress on gender equality at the level of a programme or grant.

By applying indicators, such as the number of participants in training programmes or budget spent on specific measures, it can be checked on a short-term basis whether gender objectives are met or adaptations need to be implemented. It also helps to maintain the accountability of the stakeholders involved. Furthermore, the GEP criterion of the European Commission requires research funding bodies to present data annually.

As intersectionality is of increasing relevance, research funding bodies are encouraged to extend their monitoring system in this direction.

Part of the monitoring at call level is also to produce final evaluation reports for applicants and panel reports, which need to be written in gender-sensitive and inclusive language.

Furthermore, any post-granting activities (e.g. changes to the principal investigator, financial compliance, extension in the case of illness) need to be addressed from a gender perspective.

More information on monitoring can be found in step 5 of the step-by-step guide for research funding bodies ⬈.

Evaluation

The final step is the evaluation of the funding programme / grant with respect to the gender targets. Once all final data along all steps of the funding cycle is available, the funding body needs to check whether all objectives were met and where adaptations for a next call are needed.

At the core of evaluation is the **analysis of all granted and non-granted applications** with respect to gender, discipline (where relevant) and other categories (addressing gender). Checking the gender distribution in each step of the evaluation process based on clearly identified indicators might help to gain detailed insights and to identify where interventions are needed.

As the **panel** is a crucial entity for negotiations, assessment and decision-making, all data should be analysed at panel level to learn about differences and to identify potential interventions.

Evaluation should also cover qualitative aspects, such as a check of biased language used in panel discussions or evaluation reports, as well as in the call text or guidelines for reviewers / panel members. In that regard, a language scan, applying linguistic software, could be useful.

All relevant data and learnings should be reported to national authorities and the public in order to guarantee accountability, but also to provide the funding body – and other stakeholders – with insights for the design of future programmes/grants.

More information on evaluation can be found in step 5 of the step-by-step guide ↗ for research funding bodies.

Planning

Monitoring and evaluation deliver crucial information on gender-sensitive funding outcomes and processes ahead of the funding decision. Funding bodies need to take time to reflect on the learnings and how to integrate them in the next funding cycle. By aiming to improve each step from a gender and intersectional perspective, the design of a funding programme / grant can be adjusted, grant allocation can be optimised and gender equality in research funding can be constantly enhanced.

Get inspired by what other research funding bodies have implemented

Here are some examples of measures implemented in other funding organisations (note that they will open in a new window).

Example of awareness-raising and capacity building

Blind assessment, Villum Foundation, Denmark.

Examples of monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring equal opportunities, Austrian Science Fund (FWF), Austria.

Observatory of Research and Scientific Careers of the FRS-FNRS, FNRS Fund for Scientific Research, Belgium.

Examples of gender equality plan development and implementation

GEP 2020–2027, Estonian Research Council, Estonia.

GEP, Academy of Finland, Finland.

GEP, Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), Romania.

Examples of gender equality in recruitment and career progression

Implementation of target 3 of their gender equality, Research and Innovation Foundation, Cyprus.

Small grant scheme for female scientists in technical sciences, National Centre for Research and Development, Poland.

Supporting young mother researchers, The National Research, Development and Innovation Office, Hungary.

Enterprise Ireland 2020 action plan for women in business, Enterprise Ireland, Ireland.

Gender equality in the national R & I funding programme FUSION, Malta Council for Science and Technology, Malta.

Example of gender balance in leadership and decision-making

Spokesperson budget , Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Germany.

Examples of integrating gender into research and teaching

Gender in research fellowship, The Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw), the Netherlands.

Women and Science Committee, Spanish National Research Council, Spain.

Equal funding of innovations, Vinnova, Sweden.

Model for equal distribution of research funds, Kristianstad University, Sweden.

You can find further inspiring practice examples in the following sources:

the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) provides a section on good practices for various relevant topics;

these sustainable measures were already mentioned in the first version of the gender equality in academia and research (GEAR) tool and are still in place.

If you want to learn more about how you can adjust these measures for your own purposes and how to implement them through a GEP, read the step-by-step guide for research organisations, universities and public bodies, or the step-by-step guide for research funding organisations.