

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Step 1: Getting started

Main section Videos and webinars Tools and resources

Once you have realised that promoting gender equality is crucial for both your funding activities and your staff, you may be wondering how to get this process started.

As a first step, you need to understand the context of your own organisation (see below for more details), as this will influence the scope and purpose of your gender equality plan (GEP). Therefore, start analysing your funding body's type (basic/applied), history (long tradition / newly created) and funding scope (regional/national/international). Besides, the organisational context concerning your mandate and mission (area-specific/general), but also the relation to national authorities may differ.

When research funding bodies implement GEPs, they may be active at two distinct, but interrelated, levels.

They may approach **internal stakeholders** employed at the funding body and engaged in internal processes: training, capacity building for staff and management, awareness-raising or allocation of the funding budget.

They may approach **external stakeholders** when developing guidelines for reviewers and/or panel members or when defining eligibility and assessment criteria. Furthermore, in the way applicants (individual researchers, research teams or research organisations/universities) are addressed, gender comes into play in various forms.

If your research funding body is not experienced with implementing gender equality measures and/or you are a beginner regarding the development of a GEP, get started by reviewing all activities related to grant allocation processes and practices, and by reflecting where gender equality could play a role and where gender bias might occur.


Consider what you have discussed with colleagues and other stakeholders; be aware of the fact that the European Commission has emphasised the relevance of gender equality in research funding for decades, and that research has revealed various factors that might cause gender bias in research funding.

Examples of issues discussed regarding potential gender factors

Bias might already occur **before applying**, referring to dynamics in research teams, for example when women researchers are less often named as first author, or when a research organisation decides who is encouraged and supported to apply. Furthermore, networks are relevant (e.g. for citations): men have stronger networks, which is why men are cited more than women, which consequently generates higher impact points.

The **composition of panels and boards**, by sex or by country, can impact gender-fair funding outcomes and the gender awareness of a panel.

The meritocratic understanding of research and innovation (R & I) argues that success in research (funding) is based on individual merit and quality only, and that this is not influenced by any other considerations related to gender or other social variables. This is widely accepted in the R & I community, and sometimes makes it difficult to raise awareness of gender or any other form of bias.

The **concept of excellence** has been discussed as not being gender-neutral ([van den Brink and Benschop, 2005](#)) :

the ideal excellent scientist shows qualities mainly associated with men – linear career paths, organisational mobility and full temporal availability (working at weekends, a culture of working long hours).

What is perceived as excellence in science is more related to characteristics mainly attributed to men (men are perceived as being more competitive, more confident, more independent). Here, **gendermobility stereotypes** come into play – even more so when decisions are taken under time pressure – and concern women and men evaluators.

In 1997, [Wennerås and Wold](#) showed that women need to be 2.5 times more productive in order to have the same success rate as men.

Double standards in the evaluation process are often applied for women and men applicants, for example when women's independence is questioned more than men's.


Panel members or reviewers may lack awareness about gendered behaviour. Men applicants often [sell](#) their research idea or their curriculum vitae in a more assertive way, which may be seen as a signal for confidence and competence, while women applicants tend to emphasise their achievements less strongly. It was shown that women are often less confident than men (impostor syndrome) and that they may step back from applying for grants, this is even more likely to happen when women's success rates are in fact lower than those of men.

Merit/excellence is often measured by productivity, but productivity is linked to effective research time: researchers working part-time due to care obligations, or doing more administrative work or teaching, have less time for research and publishing. Others have career breaks for various reasons (jobs outside academia, illness, etc.), which might all manifest in a lower research performance. Consequently, the assessment of merit and excellence is not based on the same grounds.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new challenges to a gender-fair funding process, as decision-making has mostly taken place in virtual panels. In particular, the crisis has highlighted the relevance of integrating a sex/gender analysis into research methodology and R & I results.

Before you start with your status quo assessment and build your own GEP, consider the following issues.

Understand the context

Relevant context factors for your research funding body could be the [national research intensity](#) , the relevance of competitive funding in the national innovation system or national research policy goals.

Additional indicators, such as the scope of funding activities (national/regional, applied/basic, etc.), could be of relevance as well (see above).

Another important factor is the legal and regulatory framework (EU-level, national and regional policies) that your institution operates in, with information on the gender equality framework in R&I being of particular relevance, for example the European research area (ERA) national action plans and strategies.

For more information on the relevant legal and policy framework, see the '[Where](#)' chapter in the gender equality in academia and research (GEAR) tool, and the chapter focusing on EU objectives regarding gender equality in R & I and [Horizon Europe](#). For **additional resources** on how to consider the context of your organisation, take a look at **tab 3** in this section.

Find support

Understanding the context and dynamics of your organisation will help you to decide where best to find support within and outside your organisation. Finding support and building alliances will be relevant throughout the entire process. To convince others, it is very important that you invest time in explaining the reasons for and benefits of introducing gender equality into your organisation. If you have not done so already, make sure you browse through the information and arguments on the [landing page](#) in the '[Why](#)' chapter of this tool before reaching out to key people within your funding body.

Within the organisation, consider the following for finding support.

Map actors who have expertise in gender equality in general and in gender equality in research funding in particular. In order to do so, consider your colleagues' previous experiences and awareness concerning gender equality work. Besides providing relevant gender-related input, they may act as activists to put measures in motion and help identify other actors.

Identify (potential) allies. Consider top and middle management levels, programme

management, scientific advisory boards, human resources staff, and so on. Try to spot all those interested in promoting gender equality. Allies will help you get things done and promote the future GEP.

Outside your organisation, look at the following possibilities.

Set up alliances. Look up regional and national networks that focus on gender equality in research funding. This way you will find out what measures have already been implemented and what works and what does not. You may also check the '[Join](#)' [section](#) of this tool to find out how to network with others and share experiences.

Find funding opportunities. There are different funding schemes supporting the set-up and implementation of GEPs or other gender equality measures. At EU level, the European Commission is funding institutional change projects through [Horizon Europe](#) [↗](#), but you can also check funding options at regional or national level (authorities).

Understand the idea behind a gender equality plan

Here you can find some basic inputs for starting the development of a GEP in your research funding body.

The GEP is an opportunity to address and optimise core processes in your research funding body in terms of transparency and fairness, and from a gender equality and inclusiveness perspective. Developing a GEP offers you the chance to systematically review all activities in your research funding body (e.g. training of staff, programme planning), and also all processes related to external stakeholders, such as the selection of reviewers, panel/board members and applicants or relevant national authorities.

Build on existing structures regarding gender equality and inclusiveness in your organisation. Absolute beginner or next to being a champion – you can always try to improve your policies and serve as a pilot for others.

Implementing a GEP means aiming for change within your research funding body – be aware that this can be hard, but impactful, work, and that you will need not only commitment, but also perseverance and patience.

Research funding bodies can mainstream gender equality towards applicants / research organisations by making the sex/gender dimension a requirement for eligibility. This covers organisational processes in research organisations and the integration of gender aspects into R & I proposals.

Gender is the main category to be tackled in a GEP, but other social dimensions (age, disability, social/cultural background) might be relevant as well. Such an intersectional perspective is particularly relevant for gathering and analysing data.

Understand gender in the funding cycle

Before moving on to the next step in the process, it is very helpful to get a general understanding and overview of how the process of implementing measures for gender equality in research funding works. The funding cycle provides an overview of potential measures in the various steps of implementing a specific programme or grant. Find more information [here](#).

In order to view **videos and webinars** or further **tools and resources** on the topics discussed in step1, switch between the respective tabs. Otherwise, click below to continue to the next step and learn **how to analyse and assess the gender equality state of play in your institution**.