



Fondazione
Regionale
per la
Ricerca
Biomedica

Gender Equality Plan

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1 Background

Regional Foundation for Biomedical Research (Fondazione Regionale per la Ricerca Biomedica - FRRB) is a not-for-profit organisation established in October 2011 by Lombardy Region.

Its aim is to promote and enhance scientific research in the field of Life Sciences, particularly in the biomedical area. FRRB represents one of the main strategic platforms for boosting progress, research, development and innovation in hospitals, universities and research centres focused on biomedical research and located in Lombardy Region.

Its *raison d'être* is to serve as support for the implementation of the regional healthcare research policy, in order to place Lombardy system in a leading position in Europe. The Foundation also aims to invest local and European resources in innovative basic and translational research projects to generate positive impact on the local healthcare ecosystem and citizens.

FRRB main activities:

- Promoting research and innovation in Lombardy by allocating regional funds to basic and translational research projects through competitive calls for proposals.
- Supporting local and national technological clusters in life sciences, enabling a better coordination of research agenda in the biomedical field, as well as a more efficient use of funds.
- Attracting European and international research funds to Lombardy by participating in European projects, as those in the Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, and international partnerships.
- Disseminating scientific knowledge and culture, integrating Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) principles, and promoting gender equality among research organisations, hospitals and research partners.

FRRB acknowledges the benefits of gender equality in research, as part of the scientific excellence of the projects it funds.

FRRB aims to proactively set itself as an example to promote institutional changes in other Lombardy biomedical research institutions.

With this Gender Equality Plan (GEP), FRRB seeks to address gender inequalities and imbalances in R&I through the development and implementation of a context-specific GEP, formalising a set of actions aiming at a long term institutional transformation.

The GEP has been developed as part of the EU project "*TARGET, Taking a Reflexive approach to Gender Equality for institutional Transformation*" (H2020, GA 741672).

The design and implementation of this GEP will tackle the main issues of gender equality in research, following the advice of the Community of Practice, a community composed by healthcare staff, researchers, grants offices staff with a shared interest in promoting gender equality.

KEY POINTS

- This GEP is a public document.

This GEP is an official document, approved by the Legal Representative and publicly available on FRRB website. The aim of this GEP is to acknowledge FRRB commitment to gender equality.

- Dedicated resources have been committed to the work on the GEP.

FRRB Director appoints every two year a staff member as Equality Coordinator, responsible for the coordination of the activities related to the implementation of the GEP. The Equality Coordinator will ensure that all FRRB staff members are actively involved in the actions of the GEP.

- Data collection and monitoring processes are in place.

FRRB supports a clear and transparent data collection in all processes related to internal staff recruitment and to funded research teams. Some data, in compliance with the EU GDPR, may not be published.

- Training and capacity building.

FRRB promotes and organises events for training and capacity building on the areas covered by the GEP for the regional scientific community and its partners. All staff is involved in the implementation of the GEP. FRRB management is committed to promote actions of awareness raising among staff members and to offer special trainings.

2 Main Objectives

Building on the experience acquired throughout the TARGET Project, and in line with the new requirements of Horizon Europe Framework, specific thematic areas have been identified:

- 1) Work-life balance and organisational culture;
- 2) Gender balance in leadership and decision-making;
- 3) Gender equality in recruitment and career progression;
- 4) Integrating the gender dimension into research content;
- 5) Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

For the full achievement of gender equality in R&I, both a bottom-up and a top-down approach are necessary. The former indicates the support to organisations and researchers to address any gender imbalance, and the latter refers to the support to structural changes towards gender equality.

All areas are of equal importance for FRRB and can be viewed as priorities.

The Foundation aims at providing support to the organisations it funds to remove any existing barriers to gender equality, especially addressing the factors that limit equal participation and advancement of individuals.

All activities are presented according to five thematic areas, which are interconnected.

2.1 Work-life balance and organisational culture

2.1.1 Incorporating gender-related issues into internal procedures and regulations

Why? Internal procedures are operational documents that describe the *modus operandi* of FRRB, according to the different roles. Clear, well-written and up-to-date procedures support transparency and accountability.

Goals: To provide an institutional recognition of the non-discrimination principle.

How? A careful analysis of internal procedures is carried out.

Indicators: Nr. of relevant procedures modified to include gender equality issues.

Output: Ethics code and recruitment procedures revised.

2.1.2 Providing the institutional GEP to newly recruited staff as part of the starting pack

Why? It is fundamental that all new recruited staff members are aware that gender equality and inclusiveness are the core of FRRB organisational structure.

Goals: Increasing general awareness of gender equality and anti-discrimination principles in the organisation.

How? Providing a copy of the GEP to the newly recruited staff, to be signed along with the ethics code at the moment of the start of the contract.

Indicators: Nr. of staff members who are provided with a copy of a GEP

Output: Inclusion of the GEP in the induction pack for newly recruited staff members.

2.1.3 Promoting work-life balance as an improved approach to work

Why? Reaching a balance between work and personal life can lead to significant improvements in productivity, a lower risk of burnout and a greater sense of well-being.

Goals: Adopting an internal procedure for remote work to allow all staff member to benefit from it.

How? Establishing a procedure regulating remote working.

Indicators: Nr. of staff members benefitting from remote working arrangements.

Output: The remote work arrangements have demonstrated to be extremely useful and well managed by all staff members. A new regulation is being elaborated.

2.2 Gender balance in leadership and decision-making

2.2.1 Elaborating a Position Paper on gender equality in research, with a focus on Gender Equality Plans and gender medicine.

Why? It is fundamental to raise awareness on the topic of gender equality in research and the importance of Gender Equality Plans, especially since they are becoming an essential condition to apply for funding. Also, it is important that the scientific community realises that gender equality is also a critical condition for excellent research.

Goals: Raising awareness on gender equality issues and providing guidance the new GEP requirements. The elaboration of a GEP also requires the analysis of a wide amount of data on gender representation, that can lead to a reflection of the leadership structure of an organisation.

How? Drafting a document (policy paper) which raises awareness among researchers, as well as the wider scientific community and the regional stakeholders. Supporting an open and transparent data collection on gender representation in the life sciences organisations.

Indicators: Nr. of downloads/visualisations of the position paper.

Output: Publication of the position paper in order to reach a large audience.

2.3 Gender equality in recruitment and career progression

2.3.1 Developing a tool for the internal monitoring of gender related data and indicators

Why? Collecting data on gender distribution can help reflecting on decision making processes, impacts on implementation of different activities, career progression for each staff member.

Goals: Monitoring gender distribution in the different staff category and adopting corrective measures if needed.

How? Creating a monitoring tool constantly updated that reports data on the role, the level of career, the type of contract of FRRB staff. This document is managed by the administration officer and is available in a secure online folder.

Indicators: Constant update and monitoring of the tool.

Output: A management tool to monitor the gender distribution among all roles in FRRB.

2.3.2 Establishing unbiased and transparent progression and development paths

Why? Establishing clear, unbiased and transparent objectives, based on the different roles, for each staff member, supports the engagement of employees. In addition, it offers the opportunity of a motivating conversation with the employer, that creates clarity about employees' performance and objectives.

Goals: Establishment of transparent criteria for progression and promotion.

How? Approving an institutional procedure that establishes clear criteria to define the objectives, the evaluation, the reward.

Indicators: Correct and regular implementation of the procedure by FRRB management.

Output: Approval of a procedure establishing objectives for each role. The achievement of the assigned objectives can lead to a financial reward.

2.4 Integrating the gender dimension into research content

2.4.1 Organisation of a Community of Practice (CoP)

Why? In an area as important and encompassing as gender equality, especially in research, no organisation can work alone. This is why the creation of a CoP is necessary to gather stakeholders to work towards specific goals, exchanging ideas, discussing, identifying needs and challenges. The work of a CoP can lead to the elaboration of gender equality plans, strategies, actions, new forms of cooperation, and to the exchange of a plurality of perspectives.

Goals: The organisation of a Community of Practice to exchange experiences, to develop knowledge, for capacity building and know-how for gender equality.

How? Working with a CoP, on different topics, to build relationships, learn, develop best practices and identify areas of actions.

Indicators: Nr. of events (online/in person) organised with the CoP.

Output: Active participation in all meetings by stakeholders and FRRB staff. Increased interest among the scientific community and the stakeholders, that can lead to grant applications.

2.4.2 Providing support, as Research Funding Organisation (RFO), to women's careers in science

Why? Data show a limited number of women in top management positions, both in academia and in healthcare institutions. This is also due to major difficulties in advancing in the career. Although this is changing, more needs to be done to increase the participation of women in research, encouraging their participation in grant applications and in research projects.

Goals: Supporting women's careers in science, increasing the number of women PIs, encouraging a more gender equal research.

How? Including in FRRB Calls for Proposals and on its institutional website a sponsorship to applications from female researchers (i.e., compulsory minimum number of women PIs in collaborative projects, requesting the submission of a GEP together with the applications, including in FRRB Calls for Proposals specific measures for maternity/paternity leave).

Indicators: Nr. of women PIs applying for funding; Nr. of women PIs awarded funding.

Output: Increased participation of women PIs in research projects, including women with children.

2.4.3 Collecting data on gender representation among PIs in funded projects

Why? To verify the impact of gender equality measures applied by FRRB, it is necessary to pay attention on sex-disaggregated data on number of applicants, number of grants allocated, success rate of applicants.

Goals: Analysing of gender gaps in research funding, additional and tailored actions can be drafted and implemented to promote gender equal participation.

How? Creating a database to keep track of gender representation among PIs in applications and in funded projects.

Indicators: % of women PIs, monitoring of any changes in response to new actions implemented.

Output: A database, collecting all projects results disaggregated by sex, has been created and it is constantly updated.

2.4.4 Collecting information on gender policies in place in the applicant and funded institutions

Why? In light of the growing importance of gender equality in research, also given the upcoming requirements of a GEP to apply for EU funding, it is important to monitor how gender policies are adopted and implemented in the organisations and institutions who apply for funding to FRRB.

Goals: Monitoring the development of gender policies in the stakeholder organisations applying for funding to FRRB. Awareness raising among the scientific community through presentations of the Calls and the results of the survey.

How? Collecting data on gender representation in research and healthcare institutions through a survey. Following the survey sent to applicants participating to a Regional Call for proposals in 2018, FRRB is working on a more detailed survey structure.

Indicators: Nr. of surveys completed and submitted together with the project proposals.

Output: In 2018 100% applicants replied to the survey, and two organizations submitted their GEP (in one case it was elaborated specifically to participate to the FRRB call). A new survey, more structured according to applicant's organisations, will be elaborated. A report on gender related data (nr. of women PIs, nr. of women Full professors/in leading roles, etc.) will then be realised.

2.4.5 Including in the call texts a focus on sex and gender in the content of the research

Why? For a long time, gender equality in research has been intended as gender balance in research team. However, with the development of the studies in the field of gender medicine or gender-specific medicine, it is becoming necessary to consider the biological differences between females and males and also the gender differences, meant as the result of socio-cultural processes. The attention to sex and gender differences is strictly linked to the implementation of personalised medicine.

Goals: Raising awareness on sex and gender differences in research. Specifically, all researchers and professionals involved in research should be aware and consider, starting from the research design stage, how health conditions differ between men and women, and how they affect measures for prevention, clinical signs, therapeutic approach, psychological and social issues.

How? Introducing specific reference to "gender in research activities" and "sex/gender analysis" in the application form. Organising specific training for researchers.

Indicators: Nr. of training organised and nr. of participants involved, evaluation of gender issues included in research activities.

Output: Raised awareness on sex and gender differences in research, a more inclusive research environment.

2.4.6 Promoting gender equality awareness among the peer reviewers

Why? Sex and gender differences represent a crucial issue in designing a good research study, but are often overlooked in research design, study implementation and scientific reporting, as well as in general science communication. This leads to a limited generalizability of research results and findings, with limited successful application into clinical practice, especially for women, but also for men.

Goals: Peer reviewers are scientists whose responsibility is to evaluate the quality of a research project and, consequently, to allow a research project to be funded. It is fundamental that elements of sex and gender are adequately addressed and properly evaluated, and that reviewers are aware of the relevance of these aspects.

How? Providing a guidance document to reviewers, focusing on the correct use of words to describe sex and gender, and on how these elements are described in the proposal. Reviewers are also asked to take into account in their evaluation the gender composition of the research team.

Indicators: Approval of a guidance document that reports information of how to evaluate gender equality in research and a well balance composition of a research team.

Output: Guidelines for reviewers have been developed, formally approved by the General Director and distributed.

2.5 Measures against gender-based violence, bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment

2.5.1 Adopting specific policies to contrast gender-based violence, bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment

Why? Gender violence, as well as situations of bullying and harassment, are complex issues that occur in different situations and environments, including research organisations and research funding organisations. Often, these issues are not properly acknowledged or addressed, leading the victims to feel more isolated, let alone discriminated.

Goals: Raising awareness on these issues within FRRB staff and among the stakeholder organisations (hospitals, research institutions, universities, policy makers), introducing policies to tackle these issues into internal documents and procedures.

How: Including a gender perspective in internal policies and in the actions, including training, towards the Community of Practice and the scientific community, to prevent situations of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, mobbing and bullying. The General Director, with the support of the Equality coordinator, is required to ensure that all staff and collaborating institutions are aware of FRRB Gender equality policies.

Indicator: Update of the internal regulation on the human resources management to include a definition of gender-based violence, bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment.

Output: Dissemination of the updated human resources management regulation. All episodes of gender-based violence, bullying and harassment shall be reported to Director (or otherwise to the Board of Directors, should the Director be directly involved) who is in charge of remedying a possible situation, including by establishing formal disciplinary actions.

3 Conclusions

Funding excellent biomedical research is the main goal of FRRB.

Achieving the GEP objectives is key to generate a gender-aware institutional culture among the research community of Lombardy Region and within the Foundation itself.

The Foundation understands the importance of monitoring as a tool to assess if positive changes are taking place, as the result of the development of new policies and actions and as a self-reflective process.

Monitoring also works as a tool to support effective actions and commitment, which increases legitimacy and creates accountability.

The CoP can further contribute to create a favourable environment for the effective implementation of the GEP. Organising regular meetings with the CoP is important for discussing, sharing, reporting and assessing the progress, main achievements and aspects that can be improved. This will allow to identify new challenges and to act proactively upon them.

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DISCLAIMER

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