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# WHY A GENDER EQUALITY PLAN?

REGIONAL  
FOUNDATION FOR  
BIOMEDICAL  
RESEARCH (FRRB)

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TARGET } Taking a Reflexive approach  
to Gender Equality for  
institutional Transformation

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## REGIONAL FOUNDATION FOR BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH (FRRB)

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# Introduction

Fondazione Regionale per la Ricerca Biomedica (FRRB) was established by Lombardy Region in October 2011. Its aim is to promote and enhance scientific research in Life Sciences, particularly in the biomedical field. Specifically, FRRB's mission is to implement the research priorities identified by the Regional Directorate General for Welfare and Healthcare.

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 regional system in a leading position in Europe in this field.

FRRB also aims to invest local and European resources in innovative basic and translational research projects to generate positive impact on the local healthcare system and citizens.

In 2016, FRRB adopted a Quality Management System to improve the overall performance of the organisation, with continuous monitoring of risks and opportunities, which is a fundamental prerequisite for responding effectively to its statutory mission. This led, in January 2017, to achieve the mark of conformity to the UNI EN ISO 9001: 2015 standard in the field of Promotion of competitive calls for the selection of innovative research projects in the biomedical field. In September 2018, FRRB also adopted its own Quality Policy.

FRRB operates on the basis of its Ethics Code, which sets out its values and principles. Since 2017, FRRB has been working on gender equality issues, and this led to the elaboration, and the official approval, of a Gender Equality Plan (GEP). As major actor in the field of biomedical research, FRRB operates on different levels and with different kind of stakeholders. Because of its activity as funding organisation, FRRB holds a constant dialogue with its beneficiaries: hospitals, research centres and universities, located on the Lombardy territory. Furthermore, FRRB is active on the national and international scenario, dealing with other funding agencies, as well as with health ministries across Europe.

# 1. Why do we need a Gender Equality Plan?

Over the years, FRRB has become a reference for what concerns research funding in Lombardy. FRRB supports research to find solutions to challenges in different areas: personalised medicine, as an overall approach to place the individual and their needs at the centre of their healthcare; rare diseases; cancer; and antibiotic resistance.

Particular attention is paid to Early Career Researchers (ECR), to drive innovation and to attract the best researchers from abroad.

FRRB is also involved in several European initiatives, including the TARGET (TAKing a Reflexive approach to Gender Equality for institutional Transformation) project, funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 Programme (Grant Agreement no. 741672) and dedicated to promoting gender equality in research and innovation.

From the beginning of TARGET project, FRRB embraced the project mission, pursuing its objectives and promoting the adoption of gender equality policies and realising several dissemination activities.

Despite the diversity of the activities, FRRB is a small team, composed by nine people: a General Director and eight staff members. A Scientific Committee and a Board of Directors collaborate in the strategic management of the organisation.

FRRB's main stakeholder is represented by the scientific community of Lombardy, mostly hospitals, universities, and research centres, which are all also beneficiaries of FRRB funding.

It is precisely in its role of funding agency that FRRB acknowledged its own influence to encourage the implementation of gender equality (GE) policies in the organisations it funds, but at the same time this could have not been done without a profound reflexive process that drove it to change and to introduce new GE policies.

Until a few years ago, there were no specific GE policies in place. This was mostly due to the size of the Foundation and the limited number of calls for proposals launched. However, following a substantial increase in the number of staff members and in the number of funding initiatives, FRRB realised the importance of incorporating GE in three areas:

- » **Internal dimension.** Through a clear commitment to the principles of non-discrimination, equal opportunities, and equal treatment.
- » **External dimension.** Through the introduction of rules for researchers applying to FRRB calls for proposals (e.g., specific provision for parental leave), tracking and collecting data on applicants/winners based on sex/gender.
- » **Research dimension.** Ensuring in all calls a focus on sex and gender. This refers not only to the sex distribution within research teams, but also to the inclusion of sex and/or gender analysis in the research itself.

Based on these three considerations, the elaboration of the GEP began, addressing institutional and outreach aspects.

## 2. Designing and approving a Gender Equality Plan

In the elaboration of its GEP, FRRB could rely on a strong network.

First, all FRRB staff members and the General Director showed interest and commitment to the goal of TARGET project and in striving in all processes towards a new gender-sensitive culture.

Second, FRRB set up a Community of Practice (CoP), composed by representatives of hospitals, universities, and research centres. The members of the CoP came from different backgrounds: clinicians, researchers, and administrative staff from the grant offices. Obviously, working with TARGET partners allowed FRRB to benefit from exchanges of best practices and continuous feedback.

In 2018, FRRB drafted its first GEP, which was then formally approved by the General Director in 2019.

The initial Plan was structured around three main areas:

- » **Human resource management.** Promoting a gender-inclusive organisational culture and eliminating unconscious gender biases in all aspects of human resource management.
- » **Decision-making.** Addressing gender imbalances in decision making processes, internally and externally, involving policy makers, the scientific community and the lay public. Raising awareness on how to overcome gender imbalances through the decision-making process.
- » **Integration of gender dimensions in research content.** Fostering the integration of the gender dimension in research and within the scientific community.

Each area was divided into actions, for which a target and timeframe were defined.

The actions envisaged in the plan set the ground for important changes, both at institutional level and for FRRB stakeholders (hospitals and universities and research centres in Lombardy).

Following the approval of the first GEP, the following measures were introduced:

- » A revision of the ethics code, incorporating a specific paragraph on the principle of non-discrimination.
- » An internal regulation for remote working, intended as way to support the work-life balance of its employees. The regulation was introduced just a few weeks before the national lockdown, and it proved to be extremely useful.
- » A procedure for establishing clear, unbiased, and transparent objectives, based on the different roles of each staff member.

Many activities have seen the direct involvement of the stakeholders of FRRB. Specifically, the GEP was drafted at the same time as the creation of a Community of Practice (CoP), a set of local stakeholders involved in the process of promoting equal opportunities in research.

The CoP has been actively participating in a number of FRRB initiatives to raise awareness on the issue of gender equality in research and on gender medicine. Thanks to the CoP's inputs and feedback, the following actions have been added to the GEP:

- » An anonymised gender-disaggregated data collection of the Principal Investigators (PI), applicants, and winners of FRRB calls for proposals.
- » A first regional survey among applicant institutions to identify GE provisions already in place in research organisations, including the existence of a GEP (or an equivalent document).
- » The inclusion, in the calls for proposals text, of the requirement of sex and gender analysis in all phases of the funded research.
- » The inclusion, in the call text, of specific measures to encourage women PI participation and of provisions for parental or sick leave.
- » An updated version of the guidelines for scientific reviewers, to better evaluate not only the 'gender balance' within a research group but also whether gender and/or sex are appropriately integrated into research designs.

Following the development of EU policies and the launch of the framework programme Horizon Europe, FRRB decided to revise its GEP, in line with the new requirements set out by the European Commission.

- » The new GEP has been approved by the Director General of FRRB in August 2021. Drafted in English for wider dissemination, it is also available on the FRRB website. The GEP is a public document, approved by the Directorate, has dedicated resources, includes provisions for data collection and monitoring and for training and capacity-building activities. Although most of the actions remain unchanged from the previous version, a few innovations have been introduced:
  - » The development of actions divided into thematic areas, according to the requirements of the European Commission: work-life balance and organisational culture, gender balance in leadership and decision-making processes, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, integration of the gender dimension in research activities, and measures against gender-based violence including sexual harassment.
  - » The creation of a system to monitor the progress made towards the objectives.
  - » The appointment of an Equality Coordinator, a staff member nominated for two years by the Director General, responsible for the gender policies of the organisation and for the correct implementation of the GEP.
  - » An internal database with gender-disaggregated data on FRRB staff (employees and leadership).
  - » The update of internal procedures and regulations to make the GEP a document to be included in the induction documentation for newly recruited staff.
  - » The revision of the internal regulations on human resources, introducing specific rules of conduct with regard to violence, harassment and bullying, and a system for reporting.

## 3. Main activities implemented

Many activities, both foreseen in the gender equality plan and other gender-related activities, have been realised over the course of the TARGET project.

They can be classified in four categories:

1. Change of internal procedures
2. Integration of GE dimension in research and in the calls for proposal
3. Trainings
4. Events

### Change of internal procedures

As explained above, FRRB took on a reflexive process regarding its own organisation. With the involvement of the management and of staff members, the biggest changes concerned the modification of internal procedures, to take into account the GEP and its values; the approval of a remote working regulation, to ameliorate the work-life balance of the employees; the inclusion of specific provisions against violence; and the appointment of an Equality Coordinator.

### Integration of GE dimension in research and in the calls for proposal

Over the last few years, in all European calls where FRRB participates as a funding agency, there is reference to the integration of sex and gender analysis in the research projects. Specifically, all research teams are asked to address biological (sex) and sociocultural (gender) differences in their projects, both at the preclinical and the clinical level.

FRRB, in its own regional calls, has been integrating the same approach. Not only are researchers expected to explain how they integrate sex and gender dimensions in their studies, but also reviewers are asked to evaluate if these dimensions are properly addressed and if the relevant terminology is used correctly, besides verifying the gender balance in research teams.

### Trainings

As requested by the new GEP requirements, and as a necessary measure to acquire the skills and knowledge to contribute to the effective implementation of a GEP in a specific field or organisation, FRRB organised two trainings:

### **a. A training for its own staff**

The two-day training, held in April and May 2020, tackled two major topics: Gender Equality at Work: Myths vs Reality; and Diversity: a System Approach. The training also covered different aspects, including gender as a social construct; historical, linguistic, and social excursus on gender; resistances, in particular in a working environment; in-depth analysis of European gender regulations.

The training helped fill the knowledge gaps in terms of gender equality policies and gave an insight on the gender impact of different policies and political initiatives. The training led to an increased awareness and interest in the topic, as demonstrated by the results of the questionnaires filled in by all participants.

### **b. A training on gender medicine specific for Early Career Researchers (ECR)**

Following the launch of the call for proposal, FRRB Early Career Award, 16 ECR who were proposing innovative projects were selected for funding.

Acknowledging that sex and gender differences represent a crucial aspect in research activities – which is nonetheless often neglected in the phases of project planning, study implementation, and publication of results – FRRB organised a specific training on gender medicine (or gender-specific medicine) for the 16 ECR, inviting as speakers two major Italian experts in the field: Prof. Giovannella Baggio, President of the National Centre for Health and Gender Medicine and Scientific Editor of the Italian Journal of Gender-specific Medicine; and Prof. Walter Malorni, Scientific Director of the Global Health Centre and Director of the Reference Centre for Gender Medicine and the Italian Institute for Health. Dr. Franca di Nuovo, regional representative for gender medicine, also took part in the meeting.

## **Events**

A full list of events is presented in Annex II. FRRB strongly believes in the importance of dissemination activities, to share knowledge, findings, and best practices with stakeholders and wider audiences. Dissemination is also crucial for the success and sustainability of a project.

Among the main events, the following can be highlighted:

- » **24 October 2018: 3rd TARGET institutional workshop. Gendered innovations in science and research**  
Meeting with Prof. Londa Schiebinger, Stanford University. Presentation of case studies to demonstrate how sex and gender dimensions have an impact on innovation and discovery. It was discussed how a more comprehensive approach can bring added value to research.
- » **6 March 2019: Gender equality plans in healthcare and research institutions: FRRB seminar with its Community of Practice**  
Presentation of FRRB GEP and of the GEP of the Hospital IRCCS Fondazione 'C. Besta' based in Milan. This meeting gave the opportunity to learn about the process of creating a GEP and to collect input and feedback from the CoP.

» **6 May 2020: *Gender considerations in emergency***

Following the pandemic situation, FRRB organised a remote round table to discuss the topic of gender in emergency with some representatives of hospitals and universities in Lombardy.

» **23 February 2021: *4th TARGET institutional workshop. Athena Swan Charter and gender equality in research***

Organisation of a seminar with a panel of international experts to discuss the Athena Swan Charter scheme, a framework used to support gender equality in higher education and research, and to present a project focused on gender medicine.

» **18 March 2021: *'Tutta Cuore e cervello' Mind the gap: gender balance in health care and medical research***

Participation in the round table organised by the IRCCS C. Besta Foundation on the topic of gender balance in the healthcare sector, to provide the perspective of a Funding Agency.

» **6 May 2021: *Gender medicine, when differences matter in health***

This meeting took the form of a webinar, part of the Spring of Ideas series of meetings organised by a political party. This meeting gave the opportunity to reach out to a completely different audience.

» **20 May 2021: *Co-creation workshop on sexual harassment in academia***

Meeting to discuss measures and practices against discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence in research centres. Thanks to this meeting, FRRB started to work to address sexual harassment, violence, and bullying.

» **(ongoing) *Publication of a paper on gender equality in research and in medicine in the European, Italian and regional context.***

The paper, drafted in Italian, provides food for thought on the importance, and essentiality, of gender equality in research, medicine and in regional and national policies. It explains how courageous choices have to be made at the institutional and socioeconomic level to increase the participation, and the leadership, of women.

## **4. Main changes in the status quo of gender equality at FRRB**

Thanks to the adoption of the GEP and the process of conducting impact assessment, identifying bias and strategies to correct them, setting objectives, FRRB has changed sensibly. The work on the GEP and in general on GE policies has involved all staff, who is now more aware of the importance of the topic.

Some practices, such as gender-disaggregated data collection both for staff and for applicants, have now been acquired. The integration of sex and gender in research, as well as the pursuit of gender balance in research teams and in the panel of the reviewers, is now a standard.

An Equality Coordinator has been appointed for two years. The Equality Coordinator is in charge of the coordination of the activities related to the implementation of the GEP, they will ensure that all FRRB staff members are actively involved in the actions of the GEP.

The continuous attention to gender equality has made FRRB a reference point for the Lombardy Scientific community. FRRB is often invited to present its activities in talks or in other projects' meetings.

## **5. Looking forward**

The work accomplished so far has been considerable, but not yet finished. The implementation of a GEP, as well as a system for monitoring, is an ongoing process that will need the constant collaboration of all staff members and the management to be sustainable.

The GEP will be revised at least once every two years. As FRRB changes, its policies need to reflect the change. It is essential that, while continuing working with the CoP, FRRB increases the spectrum of its stakeholders, diversifying the participants and promoting continued dialogue and discussions.

## Annex I: List of dissemination activities

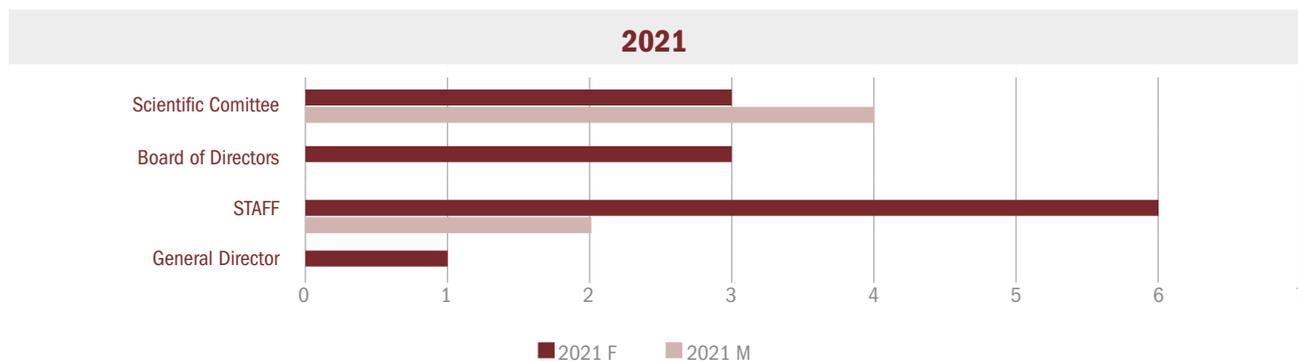
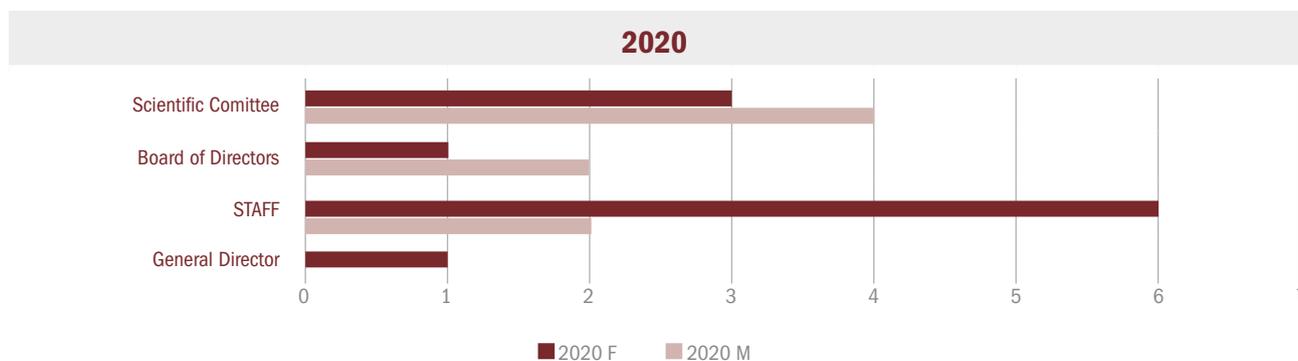
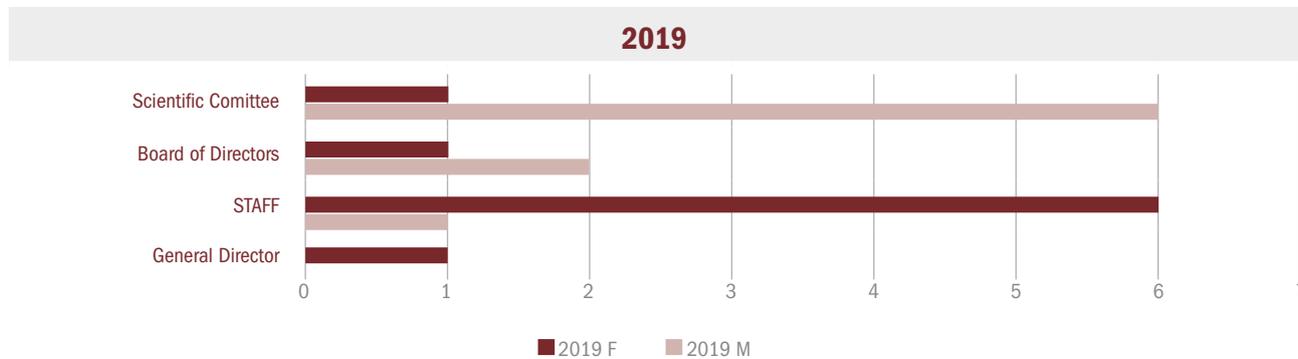
Date	Event	Link
7 June 2017	<p><b>Kick off meeting</b> <i>Bruxelles</i></p>	internal documentation
15 February 2018	<p><b>1st TARGET institutional workshop</b> Organised by FRRB, the workshop focused on the issues of gender equality and inclusion in science, taking into account topics such as: scientific excellence, raising awareness of peer reviewers on the issue of gender equality in research, age, gender quota. <i>Milano</i></p>	<a href="#">Link to the news</a>
13 June 2018	<p><b>2nd TARGET institutional workshop</b> The second workshop explored some issues related to research funding and equal opportunities in career advancement. In particular, the following issues were addressed: age discrimination, gender gaps, unconscious bias, inclusiveness in decision-making, the role of funding agencies. <i>Milano</i></p>	<a href="#">Link to the news</a>
24 October 2018	<p><b>3rd TARGET institutional workshop</b> <b>Gendered Innovations in Science and Research</b> Meeting with Prof. Londa Schiebinger, Stanford University. Presentation of case studies to demonstrate how sex and gender dimensions have an impact on innovation and discovery. It was discussed how a more comprehensive approach can bring an added value to research. <i>Milano</i></p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the news</a></p> <p>Link to the article in InGenere <a href="#">IT</a> / <a href="#">EN</a></p>

Date	Event	Link
6 March 2019	<p><b>Gender Equality Plans in healthcare and research institutions: the FRRB seminar with its Community of Practice</b></p> <p>Presentation of FRRB GEP and of the GEP of the Hospital IRCCS Fondazione C. Besta.</p> <p><i>Milano</i></p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the news</a></p>
8 March 2020	<p><b>#Commit2Gendering campaign</b></p> <p>Participation in the campaign of the 8th March 2020 in collaboration with 'sister projects'. Draft of a banner reporting the history of the FRRB GEP.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the website</a></p>
30 April 2020 – 8 May 2020	<p><b>Training on gender equality:</b></p> <p>a) Gender Equality at Work: Myths vs Reality b) Diversity: a System Approach</p> <p>Tailored training for FRRB staff.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	<p>Internal documentation</p>
6 May 2020	<p><b>Gender considerations in emergency</b></p> <p>Following the pandemic situation, FRRB organised a round table to discuss the topic of gender in emergency with some representatives of hospitals and universities in Lombardy.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the minutes</a></p> <p><a href="#">Link to the article in InGenere IT / EN</a></p>
23 February 2021	<p><b>4th TARGET institutional workshop</b></p> <p>Athena Swan Charter and Gender Equality in Research</p> <p>Organisation of a seminar with a panel of international experts to discuss the Athena Swan Charter scheme, a framework used to support gender equality in higher education and research, and to present a project focused on gender medicine.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the news</a></p> <p>Recordings available upon request</p>

Date	Event	Link
11 March 2021	<p><b>TARGET-GEECCO Conference</b></p> <p>Participation in the joint TARGET GEECCO conference to present FRRB's experience in the implementation of its GEP.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the presentations</a></p>
18 March 2021	<p><b>Tutta Cuore e cervello</b></p> <p>Participation in the round table organised by the IRCCS C. Besta Foundation on the topic of gender balance in the healthcare sector.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the news</a></p>
6 May 2021	<p><b>Gender medicine when differences matter in health</b></p> <p>Participation in the round table as part of the Spring of Ideas series of meetings.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the video</a></p>
20 May 2021	<p><b>Co-creation workshop on sexual harassment in academia</b></p> <p>In-depth study on the fight against discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence in research centres.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	<p>Internal documentation</p>
22 June 2021	<p><b>Gender Medicine in Lombardy</b></p> <p>Participation in the event organised by San Raffaele hospital in Milan, with Lombardy IRCCS network.</p> <p>Online</p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the programme</a></p>
22 June 2021	<p><b>Gender medicine and the importance of the dimensions of sex and gender in research</b></p> <p>Organisation of a training seminar addressed to the winners of the first FRRB Early Career Award call.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	<p><a href="#">Link to the programme</a></p>

Date	Event	Link
25 June 2021	<p><b>CASPER Workshop on potential EU-wide GECAS for RFOs</b></p> <p>Participation in the event organised by the CASPER consortium on the issue of gender-equality certification.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	Internal documentation
28 September 2021 - 1 October 2021	<p><b>Online study visit on gender equality policies in Austrian RFOs</b></p> <p>Participation in the presentation event of the gender equality policies of some Austrian funding agencies.</p> <p><i>Online</i></p>	Internal documentation
2-3 December 2021	<p><b>TARGET Final Event</b></p> <p>Final Meeting of the TARGET project</p> <p><i>Rome, Italy</i></p>	In preparation
15 December 2021	<p><b>FRRB final meeting</b></p> <p>Presentation of the results of the project to the local CoP and discussion on GE policies in healthcare organisations</p> <p><i>Milan, Italy, and online</i></p>	In preparation

## Annex II: FRRB data on staff



	2019		2020		2021	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
General Director	0	1	0	1	1	0
STAFF	1	6	2	6	2	6
Board of Directors	2	1	2	1	3	0
Scientific Committee	6	1	4	3	4	3