

# Gender Equality Plan

## 2022-2025



First published September 2022 and revised July 2024<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> During 2024, the HRB reviewed progress against actions in the Gender Equality Plan and decided to extend the duration of the GEP for a further year, while a broader EDI strategy for the organisation is under development.

## Foreword by CEO

In 2022, the European Commission introduced Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) as a new eligibility criterion for public bodies, research organisations and education institutions when applying to the Horizon European Funding Programme for Research and Innovation (2022-2027).

As the lead agency supporting health and social care research in Ireland, the HRB is in a unique position to promote and model gender equality, diversity and inclusion in our own activities and behaviours and in the wider ecosystem in which we operate.



In addition to being a research funder, we are a beneficiary of EU funding, through the Horizon Europe, EU4 Health and more recently the Digital Europe Programme. We are pleased to publish a GEP at a time when our ambitions are to play an even greater leadership role in expanding Ireland's participation and successes in emerging EU Partnerships and Missions.

The GEP affords an opportunity for the HRB to highlight our longstanding work and commitment to gender equality in our role as a funder of research. It also enables us to demonstrate our commitment to gender equality more broadly as a public sector organisation and has allowed us to consider how we can exert influence and change through some of our other functions.

The GEP outlines our current work in the area of gender equality and sets out the actions we are committed to progressing in the coming years. We have adopted the thematic areas recommended by the Commission as our frame of reference in compiling the GEP. Importantly, this action plan will be discussed and reviewed in the context of a new EDI Committee in the HRB, ensuring that gender equality, within an equality, diversity and inclusion agenda is fostered, discussed, integrated and coordinated across the organisation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mairéad O'Driscoll". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr Mairéad O'Driscoll

September 2022

## Introduction

The Health Research Board (HRB) is a statutory agency under the aegis of the Department of Health. It is the lead agency in Ireland responsible for supporting and funding health research, generating health information and promoting the use of evidence in policy and practice. The vision of the HRB is *Better health through excellent research, data and evidence* and the (HRB) mission is to support research that improves people's health, promotes evidence-informed care and creates solutions to societal challenges. An overview of the HRB's objectives and activities can be found in *The HRB Strategy 2021-2025, Health research - making an impact*<sup>2</sup>.

The HRB employs approximately 95 people and has an estimated budget of €55M per annum, of which on average 80% is expended in competitive, peer-reviewed grant funding. The HRB is organised into three Directorates:

- (1) Research Strategy and Funding Directorate,
- (2) Health information and Evidence Directorate and
- (3) Corporate Operations.

The proportion of women in the HRB has always been high (As of July 2024: 82% of the 90 HRB employees are women). The ratio of men to women is 5:10 and 2:2 on the Management team and Executive team respectively.

## Our approach to integrating gender equality in the HRB

The HRB is committed to espousing a culture of excellence and to playing a leading and influencing role in all aspects of our work. The HRB has identified *Inclusiveness* – including and engaging a diverse range of people in the work we do and treating everyone fairly and equitably – as one of the core values guiding the organisation. The HRB Strategy includes as a key action, a commitment to promoting '*a culture of equality, diversity and inclusion, and ethical behaviours in all aspects of our work*'.

The HRB is an equal opportunities employer, operating in accordance with the Employment Equality Acts<sup>3</sup> and our Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty<sup>4</sup>. As a public sector agency in Ireland, HRB employees have access to family-friendly policies and benefits advanced by Government in recent years. This includes paid maternity leave, paid paternity leave, paid parent's leave for each parent and allowances for carer's leave. HRB employees can apply for career breaks for family reasons, other domestic reasons, travel, educational purposes, or to take up employment in the private sector or to become self-employed. Numerous Human Resource policies enable and support our commitment to gender equality, including an Equality and Diversity Policy, Recruitment and Selection Policy, Disciplinary Policy and Procedure, Problem Resolution Policy and Procedure and a Dignity at Work Policy.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrb.ie/strategy-2025/>

<sup>3</sup> *The Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015*

<sup>4</sup> *As part of the Irish Human right and Equality commission Act 2014,*  
<https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/25/enacted/en/html>

In relation to work-life balance, the HRB has always supported flexible working arrangements for employees and more recently, we launched a new blended working policy which allows staff to combine working from the office with working remotely.

Ongoing activities such as ensuring gender-balanced interview panels and providing Unconscious Bias training for HRB employees will be further enhanced in the years ahead as set out in the action plan. For example, staff in human resources have participated in training on gender expression and identity<sup>5</sup> and in 2022 a seminar was run to raise awareness in relation to menopause, as a gender-sensitive issue for employees. These activities will be continued and enhanced in the GEP.

The GEP includes actions to improve our data collection systems and processes to collect, analyse, report and discuss organisational gender-disaggregated data to inform our actions.

The HRB plays a unique role in the Irish research landscape by spanning the health and social care, academic and innovation systems. The [Research Strategy and Funding \(RSF\) Directorate](#) manages a diverse portfolio of research grants in patient-oriented research, health services research and population health research and is an ideal position to promote gender equality, diversity and inclusion in the research and innovation ecosystem which we operate in. The HRB developed its first Gender Policy in respect of research funding in 2016<sup>6</sup> and this was further updated in 2019. Some notable developments include:

- Athena SWAN accreditation<sup>7</sup> is a requirement for Higher Education Institutions to become and/or retain their status as a HRB Host Institution<sup>8</sup>.
- The HRB commissioned an external independent review to assess the issue of bias within our grant funding policies and processes and to identify areas of best practice as a funder<sup>9</sup>.
- Unconscious bias (UB) training for staff in RSF has been delivered since 2017 and UB awareness is now integrated into all grant review panel briefings.
- While collection of data started in 2013, we began publishing headline gender-disaggregated statistics on the HRB website from 2016.
- Integration of the sex/gender dimension into research is an explicit factor in the review of grant applications since 2016.
- The HRB participated in the 2021 global review of *Sex, Gender, and Diversity Analysis in Research Policies of Major Public Granting Agencies* to assist us in benchmarking the HRB's policies and measures with funding agencies globally<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/events/upcoming-events/2022/gender-identity-and-expression-in-the-workplace/general-details>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/user\\_upload/HRB\\_Gender\\_Policy\\_Nov\\_2019.pdf](https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/HRB_Gender_Policy_Nov_2019.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/international-charters/athena-swan-ireland>

<sup>8</sup> A HRB Host Institution is a research-performing organisation that is approved by the HRB for the purpose of receiving and administering HRB grant funding

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.hrb.ie/funding/policies-and-principles/gender/>

<sup>10</sup> Preprint available here [10.31219/osf.io/3agxf](https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/3agxf)

The **Health Information and Evidence Directorate** in the HRB manages four National Health Information Systems (NHIS) in the areas of drugs and alcohol, disability, and mental health to assist with service planning and monitoring of key policies at national, EU and international levels. It also includes the HRB Evidence Centre, which conducts evidence syntheses commissioned by the Department of Health annually to inform health policy. Staff in this directorate have become increasingly engaged in activities to highlight the importance of integrating sex/gender as structural variables in databases, surveys and searches and to ensure that results and conclusions are generally disaggregated for men and women. For example, the HRB participates on the European Group on Gender and Drugs<sup>11</sup>, which focuses on promoting a gender perspective in the field of drugs research.

## Approach to developing the GEP

A cross-organisational GEP group was convened in January 2022 to develop the GEP and this included representatives from Human Resources, the Research Strategy and Funding Directorate and the National Health Information and Evidence Directorate. It was chaired by the Director for Research Strategy and Funding and reported to the Executive Team. Meetings were held from January-June 2022 and GEP was endorsed by the Executive Team in September 2022.

## Key strands of the GEP

Actions in the GEP are collated under four main pillars or strands of work, taking into account the recommended thematic areas set out by the European Commission.

1. Integrating gender equality as a critical aspect of a healthy research and innovation culture
2. Enhancing and refining our data collection and reporting systems
3. Playing a lead role in promoting gender equality with our partners and collaborators
4. Advancing gender equality as a shared, overall task for the organisation as a whole

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/topics/women\\_no](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/topics/women_no)

## STRAND 1

### Integrating Gender Equality as a critical aspect of a healthy research and innovation culture

#### Grant application numbers

Over the period 2013-2021, the HRB received slightly more applications overall from women than men. This was not always the case, with a change evident from 2014. This may be due to a number of factors, including a significant change in strategic focus from 2010 where the HRB ceased its support for basic and applied biomedical research and directed its investment towards patient-oriented research, population health research and health services research. The HRB also introduced its first Gender Policy in 2016.

We will continue to collect data and monitor gender dimensions in grant applications. Analysis since 2020 shows 55% of applications were from men, which may indicate that COVID-19 disproportionately affected Women in academia and research more than men and/or it may relate to the type of projects necessarily prioritised during this emergency response period.

**Action 1.1**      **We will ensure Guidance for applicants is gender proofed and updated in line with emerging guidance, to attract as wide and diverse a pool of talent as possible**  
(Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

**Action 1.2**      **We will monitor gender balance in grant applications** (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

#### Award Success Rates

While the number of applications to the HRB in general has tended to be slightly higher from women than men until very recently, the % success rates for lead applicants from both genders remains broadly equal.

When the success rate of applicants applying to each individual HRB scheme are analysed, success rates for men and women are between 5-10% of each other, with no key trends emerging, with the exception of the Applied Partnership Awards scheme (an applied project grant scheme to generate evidence to inform health and social care policy and practice, with a requirement to include knowledge user organisations as a partner). Here, success rates are consistently higher in women than men, which may or may not relate to the fact that it is an applied scheme to inform policy and practice, which requires co-design and close relationships with knowledge users.

**Action 1.3**      **We will monitor gender balance in success rates across the overall funding portfolio and by scheme/instrument** (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

### Career Stage

The proportion of applications to the HRB from women is highest for early-stage awards (almost twice as many applicants compared to men for doctoral awards and post-doctoral awards). There is trend towards a more gender-balanced pool of applicants (and success rates) at emerging investigator, Principal investigator and research leader levels. Analysis of variances in application number and success rates across career stages is critical to informing future actions.

**Action 1.4**      **We will monitor gender balance in applications and success rates across all career stages** (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

### Award Value

To date, our data shows that even though success rates for men and women are broadly equal, women secure lower monetary value awards compared with men. Having gender dis-aggregated data by career stage and by scheme above can assist us in trying to understand this trend.

**Action 1.5**      **We will monitor gender balance in both award success rates and award value** (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

### Research assessment and decision-making processes

The HRB has introduced a number of actions to overcome potential sources of gender bias within our peer review and selection processes. In 2016, we set a target of securing at least 40% of the under-represented gender on our funding panels, and we have successfully met this target since 2017.

**Action 1.6**      **Strive to achieve 40% of the under-represented gender on grant panels, (including Public and Patient reviewers) and monitor gender balance in selection of Chairs** (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

Unconscious Bias training was introduced for staff and all panel briefings include content to raise awareness about unconscious bias. We will continue these activities, constantly learning and building on emerging best practice.

**Action 1.7**      **Provide training to empower HRB staff to identify and challenge (unconscious) biases during grant reviews and panels** (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

**Action 1.8**      **Ensure that Unconscious bias is referenced prior to panel members beginning their reviews, either on slides, or through viewing a video** (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

The HRB is actively engaged in ongoing EU/ERA discussions to advance a coalition on the Reform of Research Assessment, and we have a track record of working with partners, including but not limited

to Science Europe and in relation to DORA<sup>12</sup>, to integrate gender equality, diversity and inclusion considerations into our assessment processes.

**Action 1.9** We will ensure that the gender dimension is a key strand of our Reform of Research Assessment activities (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

### Integration of the gender dimension into research

Gender sensitivity enhances the societal relevance of the knowledge, technologies and innovations generated from research investment, and ensures greater relevance of treatments, programmes and services for practitioners, policymakers and the public. Both the Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation and Science Europe have emphasised that gender perspectives have not been sufficiently integrated within research and innovation (R&I) content<sup>13,14</sup>. It is well established that omitting the integration of sex and/or gender analysis into the design, implementation, analysis, and reporting of research can lead to poor results and missed opportunities and ultimately worse health outcomes for people<sup>15</sup>.

In 2016, the HRB made it mandatory for applicants for funding to set out how they will integrate the gender dimension into the proposed research activity, and this is a key element of the assessment criteria for reviewers.

**Action 1.10** As recommended in the ‘Global review of Sex, Gender, and Diversity Analysis in Research Policies of Major Public Granting Agencies’, provide clear definitions of terms used and enhance guidance for panel and peer reviewers (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

**Action 1.11** Ensure application forms for funding include a consideration of sex and/or gender in research projects, in line with emerging guidance (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

### Grant Terms and Conditions

HRB policies and Terms and Conditions of awards include a requirement for Athena Swan award status and timelines as set out in the Higher Education Authority statement on Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland<sup>16</sup>. In addition, the HRB requires similar adherence to Gender Equality principles for Host Institutions that are not Higher Education Institutions. We will continue to integrate such principles and conditions into our policies and contracts.

**Action 1.12** We will maintain a requirement for Athena Swan award status and timelines as set out in the Higher Education Authority statement on Athena SWAN Charter in Ireland, (or subsequent updates) (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

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<sup>12</sup> <https://sfdora.org/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9305-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>14</sup> [Response to the European Commission Consultation on Horizon Europe Co-design 2021-2024 - Science Europe](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Medicine and Health Case Studies | Gendered Innovations \(stanford.edu\)](#)

<sup>16</sup> [HEA-Statement-on-Athena-SWAN-Charter-in-Ireland-.pdf](#)



The HRB is committed to ensuring that all activities across all functions of the HRB integrate gender dimensions to the greatest extent possible.

**Action 1.13** Highlight the importance of sex and/or gender as an integral part of training for stakeholders inputting data to National Health Information systems (Health Information and Evidence Directorate)

**Action 1.14** Promote awareness of the need to consider the impact of sex and/or gender for those making data access requests to National Health Information systems (Health Information and Evidence Directorate)

**Action 1.15** Promote awareness of the need to consider the impact of sex and/or gender for policymakers requesting reviews from the HRB Evidence Centre (Health Information and Evidence Directorate)

**Action 1.16** Routinely include analysis by sex/gender in NHIS and HRB Evidence Centre publications and presentations (National Health Information Systems Unit and Evidence Centre)

## STRAND 2

### Enhance and refine our data collection and reporting systems

The HRB uses a platform called Grant-E-Management Software (GEMS) to manage all stages of the grant lifecycle from application and review, to contracting, payments and monitoring and evaluation. Lead applicants, Co-Applicants and Panel members must create a user account on GEMS, and they are required to select a gender category. Since 2020, the HRB collects data across four categories- woman, man, other, prefer not to say.

**Action 2.1** We will update GEMs to include five gender categories (Man, Woman, Gender non-binary, Another gender identity, Prefer Not to Say) (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

**Action 2.2** We will explore options within GEMS to capture self-reported gender data on HRB-funded personnel (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

**Action 2.4** We will ensure that gender equality, diversity and inclusion is a key consideration when updating our Evaluation Strategy and Implementation Plan (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

We will share our findings with the wider research community, compare data with other funders, raise awareness of any trends that we see, and promote discussion in the community to support positive changes across the sector.

**Action 2.5**      **We will publish gender-disaggregated statistics annually on our website** (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

The National Health Information Systems managed by HRB have different protocols for collecting data on gender (ordinarily of the service user). Data collected from individuals often captures the sex assigned at birth and offers only binary options. HRB can add or edit categories (such as gender) in some, but not all, of the health information systems, and there is a key dependency in some cases on health care or social service providers to request gender data from individuals.

**Action 2.6**      **We will conduct an in-depth review of what sex and/or gender data is currently collected by each of our National Health Information systems** (National Health Information Systems Unit and Evidence Centre)

**Action 2.7**      **We will identify options for aligning the approach across systems and allowing individuals to self-gender** (National Health Information Systems Unit and Evidence Centre)

**Action 2.8**      **We will include analysis by sex and/or gender in all bulletins, annual reports and other outputs** (National Health Information Systems Unit and Evidence Centre)

**Action 2.9**      **We will collect data (on a voluntary basis) on the gender of individuals requesting access to data from the National Health Information systems** (National Health Information Systems Unit and Evidence Centre)

At present, job applicants to the HRB and HRB employees are asked to provide information on their gender with male, female or not disclosed as response options. HRB recognises the existence of a broader range of gender identities and will refine the categories currently used (with gender identity options). In collecting this data, we will inform individuals about why sex/gender data is requested by the HRB and how it will be stored and used.

In addition to informing internal action, the data collected will ensure that we can comply with Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021. These reporting requirements will come into effect in 2025 and will require HRB to provide detailed reports on hourly levels of remuneration, including benefits in kind, analysed by “gender”<sup>17</sup>.

**Action 2.10**      **Establish systems and processes to collect and analyse organisational gender-disaggregated data** (Corporate Operations)

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<sup>17</sup> At present the legislation only provide for two (Sex) categories, Male and Female

**Action 2.11** Provide inputs on gender disaggregated data to the EDI Committee, an annual report to the HRB Executive Team and submissions, when required, to comply with public sector Gender Pay Gap reporting requirements (Corporate Operations)

## Strand 3

### Play a lead role in promoting gender equality with partners and collaborators

The HRB will continue to play a lead role in promoting gender equality in all aspects of our work in the research and evidence ecosystem. The HRB does not hold all of the levers for change, so we will work with others in all parts of the research and innovation ecosystem. We will strive to learn from our own data analysis and experiences, we will be open and transparent in our partnerships with others and will listen and learn from others that are seeking to achieve common goals.

**Action 3.1** We will work as part of the National Gender Equality Funders Forum<sup>18</sup> to share information and experiences, and to identify potential synergies/common approaches (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

**Action 3.2** We will participate in the Athena Swan national committee, working with Equality Leads in Higher Education Institutions in Ireland to support the development of Athena Swan Ireland (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

**Action 3.3** We will work with other Communities of Practice in Gender Equality and EDI, including through initiatives such as GENDERACTION+<sup>19</sup> (Research Strategy and Funding Directorate)

**Action 3.4** We will partner with international organisations<sup>20</sup> to utilise lessons learned and international best practice for gender equality, diversity and inclusion (Cross-organisational)

## Strand 4

### Advance gender equality as a shared, overall task for the organisation as a whole

The HRB will continue to monitor sex/gender disaggregated data on personnel to assess the effects of its actions and policies. This is in line with the overall monitoring of the effects of its policy

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<sup>18</sup> This Forum, founded by the HRB in 2018, was renamed as the Equality Funders Forum, to reflect the expanded scope from gender equality to EDI

<sup>19</sup> The successor to FORGEN, [Funding Organisations for Gender \(act-on-gender.eu\)](https://act-on-gender.eu)

<sup>20</sup> For example, Science Europe, the EU Reform of Research Assessment Coalition, the European Group on Gender and Drugs.

measures within the HRB Human Resources Policy Framework and its strategic ambitions towards a more inclusive culture.

Through enhancing our systems for collection and reporting of gender-disaggregated data (outlined in Strand 2), we can inform discussions in areas such as recruitment, retention, training and development, and promotions, which should provide the basis for interventions to increase gender equality within the organisation.

**Action 4.1**      **Review and refresh HR policies, as required, to ensure that they are gender-proofed** (Corporate Operations)

**Action 4.2**      **Deliver refreshed Unconscious Bias training for all staff** (Corporate Operations)

**Action 4.3**      **Ensure gender balance on recruitment panels and gender-sensitivity in the recruitment process through recruitment training for all interviewers** (Corporate Operations)

**Action 4.4**      **Facilitate gender-relevant seminars and events, to ensure awareness of gender equality increases across the organisation** (Corporate Operations)

**Action 4.5**      **Invite and collate the views of staff on gender equality issues using staff engagement surveys** (Corporate Operations)

## **GEP Monitoring and Reporting**

GEP actions will be integrated into business planning, resourcing (both human capital and financial) and reporting processes in the HRB, with key actions explicitly incorporated into the workplans of individuals across Directorates. Reporting to monitor progress towards gender equality will take place on an annual basis. The annual review conducted by line managers and Directors does not exclude more frequent monitoring of individual measures/actions.

In addition, a new cross-organisational EDI committee will facilitate regular and structured discussions on gender equality (and other types of inclusiveness), including on the GEP Actions. This will enable us to assess progress towards achieving our objectives, to learn about the implementation process, to set additional objectives and targets and identify areas for improvement.