

COST Association Gender Equality Plan (and Gender Pay Gap)¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

COST – European CO-operation in Science and Technology – provides networking opportunities for researchers and innovators to strengthen Europe’s capacity to address scientific, technological and societal challenges. There are three strategic priorities: promoting and spreading excellence, fostering interdisciplinary research for breakthrough science, and empowering and retaining young researchers and innovators. COST implements its mission by funding bottom-up, excellence-driven, open and inclusive networks for peaceful purposes in all areas of science and technology.

The COST Association is an international non-profit association based in Brussels with a membership of 43 European countries. It draws its funding from the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon Europe, through Specific Grant Agreements signed under the umbrella of a Framework Partnership Agreement with the European Commission.

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Our three strategic priorities:

- Promoting and spreading excellence;
- Fostering interdisciplinary research for breakthrough science;
- Empowering and retaining young researchers and innovators.

With the introduction/start of Horizon Europe, the European Commission made gender equality plans (GEPs) a basic requirement for participation in its research framework program. It defined GEPs as: *“A set of commitments and actions that aim to promote gender equality in an organisation through a process of structural change”*.

The promotion of equality between women and men is a task for the Union, in all its activities, required by the Treaties. Gender equality is a core value of the EU, a fundamental right and key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It is a reflection of who we are. It is also an essential condition for an innovative, competitive and thriving European economy. In business, politics and society as a whole, we can only reach full potential if we use all of our talent and diversity.

The European Union is a global leader in gender equality: 14 of the top 20 countries worldwide on gender equality are EU Member States. Thanks to robust equal treatment legislation and jurisprudence, efforts to mainstream the gender perspective into different policy areas, and laws to address particular inequalities, the EU has made significant progress in gender equality in the last decades.

2. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this document is to describe where the COST Association stands with regards to Gender Equality, including the state of play regarding, a potential gender pay gap. It also describes improvements to make, if any.

3. RESPONSIBILITIES

The COST Association Director is responsible for this document and reserves the right to make necessary amendments over time, in which case staff will be informed accordingly.

4. WHAT IS A GENDER EQUALITY PLAN (GEP)?

In the specific context of research organisations and higher education institutions, the European Commission considers a **Gender Equality Plan** as a set of actions aiming at:

1. Conducting impact assessment / audits of procedures and practices to identify gender bias;
2. Identifying and implementing innovative strategies to correct any bias;
3. Setting targets and monitoring progress via indicators.

5. GENDER EQUALITY IN ACADEMIA AND RESEARCH – GEAR TOOL

The aim is to make universities and research organisation equal for women and men. The Gender Equality in Academia and Research (GEAR) tool provides universities and research organisations with practical advice and tools through all stages of institutional change, from setting up a gender equality plan to evaluating its real impact.

5.1. Horizon Europe Gender Equality Plan eligibility criterion and how the COST Association applies it

In the understanding of the Horizon Europe work programme, a GEP should consist of the following.

- **Four minimum mandatory process-related requirements.**
 - **Public document.** A GEP is a formal document published on the organisation's website, signed by the top management and actively communicated within the organisation. The COST Association Gender Equality Plan is signed by the Director of the COST Association, put in the Share Drive of the Association and communicated to its whole staff;
 - **Dedicated resources.** A GEP must include a commitment to provide sufficient resources and expertise in gender equality for implementation. The COST Association HR Unit and Policy Unit worked on the Gender Equality Plan documents;
 - **Data collection and monitoring.** A GEP should be informed by collecting and analysing sex-disaggregated data on personnel (and students, for the relevant organisations). Organisations should report progress annually based on specific indicators. COST Association gender data on personal was collected and analysed. This information can be consulted hereunder – point 5.5 "Data on equality". Progress is reported yearly;
 - **Training.** A GEP must include awareness-raising and training activities on gender equality for the whole organisation and training on unconscious gender biases for staff and decision-makers. The COST Association will take this into consideration in its yearly annual training plan which can be consulted on the Share drive of the organisation.
- **Five recommended content-related requirements:**
 - **Work-life balance and organisational culture;**
- The COST Association considers work-life balance very important. Indeed, it contributes to becoming an attractive employer and it enables staff members to perform better their tasks. Among others, here are the measures/laws applied by the COST Association as far as "Work-life balance" is concerned:

- Career interruptions (parental leave, educational leave...), flexible working hours, homeworking/teleworking, extra-legal holidays, several kind of “leave of absence” (can be consulted in our Labour Regulations). The concerned internal HR procedures and the Labour Regulations can be consulted for more details;
- We actively promote and protect the laws/legislation concerning maternity leave, prophylactic leave;
- **Gender balance in leadership and decision-making;**
- At the COST Association 71% of the staff members are women. Concerning the Management team of 8 Managers, 5 are women.
 - **Gender equality in recruitment and career progression;**
- See explanation of the recruitment process hereunder. Concerning the career progression, this is not possible at the COST Association, but for internal transfer of staff, internal recruitment process or if we have to promote someone internally, with equal qualifications we would choose a staff member of the underrepresented gender.
 - **Integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content;**
- Based on the Horizon Europe work programme, the GEP should notably consist on the organisation of training activities on gender equality for the whole organisation and training on unconscious gender biases for staff and decision-makers. The COST Association encourages Training and Development as explained in its internal procedure and its yearly training plan. Indeed, by participating in training programs, staff members can acquire new and relevant skills that align with the demands of their industry. This continuous learning process enables them to stay up-to-date with the latest trends and advancements, making them more adaptable and valuable assets to their employers. The COST Association will take this into consideration in its yearly annual training plan which can be consulted on the Share drive of the organisation.
 - **Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.**
- As mentioned in our Labour Regulations, the employer takes the preventive measures necessary to protect staff members against psychosocial risks at work. The said measures may be consulted, as from 2015 and the years thereafter, in the enterprise’s global prevention plan. This plan is held by the enterprise’s internal prevention advisor. The employer gives the staff members all the information required with regard to these prevention measures, and in particular the procedure to be followed in the event of psychosocial risk.

The measures taken by the COST Association to protect staff members against violence and harassment (More details can be found in the COST Association Labour Regulations) are notably the following:

1. A prevention advisor belonging to the External Service for Workplace Prevention and Protection has been designated by the COST Association to fulfil various tasks within the Association with regard to the prevention of psychosocial risks. That person may participate in the analysis of the risks and the framing of the prevention measures, and receives requests for informal and formal psychosocial interventions from persons stating that they are victims of a psychosocial risk. The name and details of the said advisor are: Psychosocial Unit of the External Service for Workplace Prevention and Protection Securex (accessible Monday to Friday, 09.00 to 17.00 on 0800/100.59).

2. An internal confidential councillor has been appointed: there are two elected and trained internal confidential councillors at the COST Association.

3. An internal procedure for applying for psychosocial intervention.

4. Psychosocial risk in an external enterprise: A staff member working permanently in an external enterprise may call upon that external enterprise’s internal procedure if he believes himself to be the object of a psychosocial risk. If individual prevention measures need to be taken, the external enterprise shall make all the necessary contacts with the employer to ensure that the measures can effectively be implemented.

5. Acts committed by third parties: A staff member who comes into contact with other persons in workplaces and believes himself/herself to be the object of a psychosocial risk may make an anonymous statement. This shall include a description of the acts caused by

other persons in workplaces, together with the date of such acts. The staff member's identity may not be mentioned unless he gives his agreement. The employer shall be required to provide appropriate psychological support for staff members who have been the victims of acts of violence or psychological or sexual harassment committed by third parties in workplaces, and cover the costs of such support.

6. Sanctions: Other than where an accusation is injurious and defamatory, no sanction may be imposed against a staff member who has filed an application for psychosocial intervention.

5.2. The COST Association activities

At the level of the activities, the COST Association has drawn up a Gender Equality Plan for activities in the COST Programme. It can be consulted on the following link: <https://www.cost.eu/gep-cost-activities>

5.3. The COST Association communication

The COST Association promotes its GEP by external communication and internally to its staff members. The documents are put on the COST Association Intranet, Share Drive and website. The GEP will be discussed once a year within the Management Team meeting and The COST Association will also give yearly a presentation to the whole staff on the follow-up of its Gender Equality Plan.

5.4. The role of the Director

- To approve the Gender Equality Plans (GEP) and its implementation;
- To request updates regarding the implementation of the Gender Equality Plans and progress towards gender equality;
- To make sufficient financial and human resources available to implement the Gender Equality Plans;
- To approve relevant documentation, procedures and activities supporting structural change towards gender equality in the organisation.

5.5. Data on equality

(Figures from February 2024 – Interns excluded)

The below figures show the COST Association current staff members data.

Numbers and percentage of gender per department:

Units	Men	Women	Total
Director	1		1
Secretary of the Director		1	1
Communications	0	5	5
Policy	2	5	7
Finance	2	4	6
Science Operations	6	14	20
Science Administration	1	13	14
Information Systems (IT)	7	1	8
Human Resources	0	3	3
Office Services	0	2	2
Total Number of Staff members	19	48	67
Total in percentage	28,36%	71,64%	100%

Number and percentage of gender in leadership

Management Team Member	Men	Women	Total
Director	1	0	1
Managers	2	5	7
Total	3	5	8
Percentage	37,5 %	62,5%	100%

6. GENDER PAY GAP

6.1. Directive and national law

6.1.1. EUROPEAN DIRECTIVE

Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms (text with EEA relevance).

The objectives of this directive are:

- Overcoming the lack of transparency regarding remuneration levels;
- Make it easier for staff members to lodge a complaint if they think they are being discriminated as far as remuneration is concerned;
- Implement coercive measures to ensure compliance with obligations by employers.

6.1.2. NATIONAL LAW (BELGIAN LAW)

Member states have got three years to transpose the Directive into national law from its entry into force, i.e. by 2026. Therefore this document will be updated accordingly when the national law is published in the Belgian State Gazette.

6.2. What is a Gender Pay Gap (GPG) and how is it calculated?

The gender pay gap is the difference in average gross hourly earnings between women and men. It is based on salaries paid directly to employees before income tax and social security contributions are deducted. Only companies of 10 or more employees are taken into account in the calculations. [The EU average gender pay gap was 13% in 2023.](#)

Some of the contributing factors to the gender pay gap are structural and are related to sectoral segregation, unequal share of paid and unpaid work, the glass ceiling or pay discrimination, however, the far largest part of the gender pay gap remains unexplained in the EU.

6.3. Situation at the COST Association

- Working women in the EU earn on average 12.7% less per hour than men;
- Working women in Belgium earn on average 5% less per hour than men.

Average COST Association women staff members' gross monthly salaries (February 2024)	5250,24
Average COST Association men staff members' gross monthly salaries (February 2024)	5196,71

- Therefore, at the COST Association working women earn on average **2%** more than men.

7. WHERE DOES THE COST ASSOCIATION STAND WITH REGARDS TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE GENDER PAY GAP?

At the COST Association 71,64% of the staff members are women. Concerning the Management team of 8 Managers, 5 are women.

7.1. Recruitment process

As mentioned in our “Recruitment and Salary” procedure, “The COST Association strives for a fair and transparent competition for each post within the Association and a fair treatment of all candidates, including equal pay. Candidates are selected based on their relevant competences and expertise, retaining only the most qualified staff members. The aim is to recruit individuals whose profile matches best the needs, mission and values of the Association. The COST Association wants to ensure a smooth recruitment, avoiding any interruptions in the work and aiming at more qualified, committed staff.

The COST Association respects the EU Directive on the anti-discrimination law and commits itself to avoiding any discrimination during the recruitment procedure on the basis of gender, age, ethnic, national or social origin, religion or belief, sexual orientation, language, disability, political opinion, or social or economic condition. The COST Association also applies equal pay for men and women, in accordance with the Belgian law of 22 April 2012 amended by the law of 12 July 2013.

The COST Association aims at a representative gender balance within the Association, including at the supervisory and Managerial level. This is achieved by means of an equal opportunity process during the recruitment procedure, without this taking any precedence over quality and competence criteria. This principle is also reflected in the equal pay for men and women”.

During the recruitment process, before inviting the candidates by e-mail to attend the interview, the HR Team calls the candidates to inform them that they have been selected to attend the interview and ask them whether they agree with our salaries conditions and package (indeed, the COST Association salaries are based on an internal salary grid and are not negotiable).

7.2. Publication of the vacancy

The vacancy notice is published on online and offline channels. The vacancy notice includes the job description, the location where the job is to be performed, a description of the required qualifications, experience and competencies, the date of the interview, the type of contract offered, **the range of the gross monthly salary** and the deadline for receiving the application. **Job postings are gender-neutral.**

7.3. Salary information

During the whole recruitment process, the COST Association **does not** ask questions to the candidates about their salaries history in their current or previous jobs or their salary expectations. When calling the candidates to invite them for the interview, the HR Unit informs the candidates about the whole salary package and inform them that it is not negotiable. The salary package is also mentioned on the job vacancy publication.

The salary grid of the COST Association is gender-neutral. Indeed, the COST Association has drawn up its own classification of positions and salary grid based on the following criteria:

- The position;
- The staff member’s diploma;
- The level of responsibilities related to the position;
- The performance.

What category a position belongs to or what scale is applicable is determined by the position that the staff member exercises on a regular basis. The gross monthly salary in the salary grid is based on the position performed as described in the job profile.

The increase/adjustment of salaries will depend on the staff member's performance which will be evaluated during the yearly staff evaluation and will also depend on the available budget and the Belgian salary norm.

The salary grid and the classification of position are published on the Intranet of the COST Association and can be viewed by all COST Association staff members. **The salary grid used by the COST Association is transparent to all of its staff members**, so that they may know what salary they can expect according to their position in the COST Association and their working experience.

7.4. Data protection

Information on salary involves the processing of personal data. Their processing is protected by the Regulation (EU) 2016/679 and the law of 30 July 2018 on the protection of privacy.

Therefore, any personal data processed shall not be used for any purpose other than for the application of the principle of equal pay.

7.5. Gender Pay Gap

At the COST Association, women earn a little bit more than men (2% - figures of February 2024). See details hereabove.

7.6. Salary package and benefits at the COST Association

At the COST Association, on top of the **gross monthly salary**, extra benefits are granted to the staff members according to the Belgian laws/legislations:

- **A double holiday** pay paid in May of each year representing 0,92% of the last gross monthly salary.
- **A 13th month** – based on the regulations within the Joint Committee 337.
- **Meal vouchers** – EUR 8 per worked day. Contribution of the employee EUR 1,09 deducted monthly from his/her remuneration.
- **Mobile telephone and/or subscription:** is offered to each staff member. As legally required a benefit in kind is deducted monthly from the staff member's salary.
- **A hospitalization insurance** – where the employee can also subscribe his/her partner and children by paying an amount/contribution deducted monthly from his/her salary.
- **A travel insurance.**
- **A group insurance** – the COST Association pays 6% of the staff members gross monthly salary to the insurance company. This insurance includes: an extra pension scheme, disability and death insurance.
- **Reimbursement of transport costs** from home to the work place according to the legal prescriptions.
- **Holidays:** The Employee is entitled to 20 days of legal holidays per year if he/she has worked a full year in Belgium the previous year. On top of those legal holidays, the COST Association grants 2.5 days of extra holidays per trimester worked. This represents a total of 30 days holidays per year. Moreover, the collective holidays as foreseen in the Labour Regulations are fixed from 24th of December until 2nd of January included. During that closing, the staff salaries are paid.
- **Flexible working hours.**

- **Trainings opportunities.** Each staff member can follow at least 5 days of training courses per year. (Prorata for part-time staff members). This also included participation to conferences, seminars, webinars. A budget is foreseen per staff member per year for trainings.
- **Teleworking:** staff members can work from home – (for the positions/functions that allow it) – 8 days maximum per month in Belgium.
- **Career interruptions:** Possibility to take career interruptions according to the Belgian law/prescriptions: parental leave, Time credit, educational leave.
Expats: special help/support is offered to new employed expat staff members.

8. CONCLUSION

The COST Association places great importance on transparency, neutrality and equality. Notwithstanding a very positive situation with regards to the Gender Equality and Gender Pay Gap, COST continues to make efforts to raise awareness, promote and support the Gender Equality in our Association.

This GEP is a living document that will be updated regularly based on new actions and developments.

9. DEFINITIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- GEP: Gender Equality Plan;
- GPG: Gender Pay Gap;
- EU: European Commission or European Union.

10. REFERENCE AND RELATED DOCUMENTS

- The European Institute for Gender Equality;
- Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 – European Commission;
- The COST Association internal procedure “Recruitment and Salary”;
- Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, also called the Racial Equality Directive ([Directive 2000/43/EC on Anti-discrimination](#));
- Council [Directive 2000/78/EC](#) of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation;
- Council [Directive 2004/113/EC](#) of 13 December 2004 implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services;
- [Directive 2006/54/EC](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation;
- The EU Wage gap Directive – Enforcement of Equal pay Directive 2006/54/EC.;
- Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023;
- The COST Association Labour Regulation;
- The CSO note from 15-16 November 2023 concerning COST Gender Equality Plan for activities in the COST Programme.

11. REMARKS

In the COST Association we use the general term “staff member”. The reason is that this word includes the “white-collar staff members” and “blue-collar staff members” (even if the COST Association doesn’t have blue-collar workers) – as it refers to all staff members in general. However, in some (legal) documents, the word used is “worker” or “employee”. They all refer to the general term “staff member”.

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