

Policy brief #1

from the GRANted Stakeholder Conference

Context, Policies and Practices

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INTRODUCTION

The GRANted project has investigated the role of research funding organisations (RFOs) for mitigating gender bias. Formal gender equality policies of RFOs reflect the specific national policy context as well as the strategic goals RFOs. Yet how effective these policies are depends heavily on how they are implemented in practice by remote reviewers and peer review panels. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the policy implementation is vital. This policy brief summarizes main research findings of case studies in five different RFOs, covering the policy analysis and research on panel practices when implementing innovative policies, as discussed at the 2nd GRANted stakeholder conference.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The policy analysis illustrated the key role that RFOs play in mitigating gender bias in the allocation of research grants and, more generally, for contributing to a more equal and fair science ecosystem. These policies are embedded in a broader policy context of each RFO, and are related to national research intensity and overall societal emphasis on gender equality of the country. At the same time, EU gender and science policy as well as transnational collaborations between funders, e.g., Global Research Council, stimulate and inform policy adoption and design across Europe and beyond. Understanding gender equality not as a separate issue but as an important quality aspect means RFOs adopt a role of learning organisations which continuously assess, develop and implement new policies, strategies and measures, and monitor and evaluate these.

When mapping the policy approaches to mitigate bias in five RFOs and when assessing the potential of specific policies to promote gender fair grant allocation, seven areas were identified which may include risk of gender bias: strategy, structure, communication/language, criteria (evaluation, eligibility), transparency, accountability, and monitoring. On these seven areas, a gender bias risk analysis was performed for each RFO, assessing three RFOs with a low gender bias risk (FWF – Austrian Science Fund, Austria; SFI – Science Foundation, Ireland; SRC – Swedish Research Council) and two with a higher gender bias risk (NCN – National Science Centre, Poland; SRDA – Slovak Research and Development Agency; Slovakia). An overall conclusion was that there is no quick fix to avoid gender bias, and that a policy silence around gender is a significant risk.

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In the next step we analysed how the formal policies in place are implemented in practice in the assessment process, having a closer look at the work of panels and remote reviewers. We analysed how panel members understand and make use of these policies and if /how panel chairs support their implementation in panel practices. With interviews and panel observations we gained insights in the challenges that emerge when innovative gender equality policies to mitigate gender bias are implemented in practice. Consequently, we could identify some entry points that enable RFOs to improve the policies and to increase their impact and effectiveness. Furthermore, this can inspire other RFOs to learn from these experiences, and make them aware of challenges.

We found that new formal policies are not easily implemented in practice. For example, when analysing how narrative CVs are assessed and how (remote) reviewers do the assessment in practice when they are asked not to use the h-index, it came up that reviewers still secretly check the h-index. They argue that otherwise, they would lack a benchmark and could not trust the documentation. As the reviewers do not know any alternatives, they go back to the established procedure and indicator. Furthermore, innovative policy aims and underlying rationales sometimes are not easy to understand. When reviewers were asked to assess how the gender dimension (GiR) was taken into account in research proposals, many appeared to have a fuzzy understanding of GiR, mixing it up with other gender issues, like share of women team members or women applicants.

This illustrates that when implementing innovative policies that foster cultural change, guidelines and room for reflection are necessary to enable learning among the reviewers. Also panel chairs are crucial for transferring RFO formal policies into practices, and when implementing a new policy (e.g. GiR), chairs give support, explain or provide examples. Training chairs is thus of fundamental importance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH FUNDING ORGANISATIONS

Based on the results of the GRANteD project the following recommendations have been discussed at the 2nd GRANteD stakeholder conference in Vienna: RFOs are encouraged to have a systematic gender equality approach (GEP) with clear targets and measures, addressing all gender bias risk areas across the funding cycle. Starter RFO can learn from more advanced RFOs. Yet also the latter should increasingly go beyond a binary approach to gender and intersectional gender equality policies (ethnic and social-cultural background, disability, age). Having formal gender equality policies in place does not mean they are necessarily implemented in practice. To facilitate the implementation of innovative policies in practice, RFOs should clearly and comprehensively communicate the policy aims and align standards and indicators (GiR, narrative CVs etc.) across RFOs.

Reviewers need capacities and more gender awareness to adequately implement and support innovative policies. Monitoring and evaluation of gender equality policies and their implementation needs to be regular and the results need to be communicated openly and broadly within and beyond the RFOs, to enable adjusting and developing the practices.

FURTHER READING:

- Husu, L., Peterson, H. (2022a). Synthesis report on contextual factors, gender equality policy analysis and gender bias risk analysis, GRANteD Deliverable 5.1.
- Husu, L., Peterson, H. (2022b). Dynamics of gender equality policies in European RFOs: contexts, frameworks, and challenges, GRANteD Deliverable 5.2
- Schiffbänker, H., Sauer, A., Husu, L., Peterson, H. (2023): Synthesis Report on gender bias in each core-RFO, GRANteD Deliverable D6.1.
- Schiffbänker, H., Sauer, A., Peterson, H., (2023): Reforming peer review practices – lessons learned from the implementation of gender equality policies in Research Funding Organisations, GRANteD deliverable D6.3

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