



Swiss Institute of  
Bioinformatics

# Gender Equality Plan

Dec. 2023



### **About SIB:**

SIB is an internationally recognized non-profit organization, dedicated to biological and biomedical data science.

Our data scientists are passionate about creating knowledge and solving complex questions in many fields, from biodiversity and evolution to medicine. They provide essential databases and software platforms as well as bioinformatics expertise and services to academic, clinical, and industry groups. SIB federates the Swiss bioinformatics community of some 900 scientists, encouraging collaboration and knowledge sharing.

The institute contributes to keeping Switzerland at the forefront of innovation by fostering progress in biological research and enhancing health.

More info on [www.sib.swiss](http://www.sib.swiss)

Since 2020 SIB has put Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) at the heart of its culture and processes.

In December 2020, a Diversity working group was launched to investigate these questions thanks to the voluntary engagement of employees and members from our national network. Since then, their mission has been 1) to follow key indicators over time, 2) to issue recommendations and develop key actions to raise awareness about the topic and 3) to promote EDI principles in our practices. The group's activities are resting on three main pillars: science; institutional and organizational themes; academic advocacy.

This initiative is fully endorsed by SIB's leadership, who regularly follows the activities of the group and how recommendations are implemented by support departments and scientific groups at SIB. The People & Culture department and the staff committee are naturally also very engaged in these topics, cooperating with the EDI group for relevant staff related activities.

As part of this initiative, the Gender Equality theme plays a key role.

This report intends to list initiatives and engagements launched at SIB in the gender equality field, in the following five dimensions:

- Work-life balance and organizational culture
- Gender balance in leadership and decision-making
- Gender equality in recruitment and career progression
- Integration of the sex and gender dimensions into research and training
- Measures against gender-based violence

## 1. Work-life balance and organizational culture

SIB is making every effort to help its 200 employees balance their work time and personal time. Here are some of the actions taken:

In 2021, the institute decided to review its parental leave policies as follows:

- Despite the minimum length of maternity leave in Switzerland being fixed to 16 weeks, at SIB, women who have been employed for more than six months are entitled to 20 weeks' leave from the time they give birth. On top of this extended leave, the employee is guaranteed a monthly net payment equivalent to their regular monthly net salary. Women who are adopting a child newly placed into the household may be entitled, subject to the coverage by the loss of income insurance contracted by SIB, to 20 weeks' leave with 90% of their gross salary covered.
- Paternity leave at SIB has been reviewed to reach a fully paid three weeks' leave, whereas the minimum at national level is set to two weeks. This measure also extends to adoption: At SIB, parents who are adopting a child, newly placed into the household, are entitled to at least three weeks of fully paid leave provided that the adopted child is less than eight years old at the time of the adoptive placement. This measure applies to employees not entitled to 20 weeks as mentioned above.
- A parental leave of three weeks fully paid to SIB employees has been introduced to cater to the situation of employees who are not otherwise entitled to maternity leave, paternity leave or adoption leave and:
  - who are the spouse, registered partner or cohabiting partner of the parent of a born or adopted child,
  - and who live permanently with the child.

Flexible working time arrangements are very common at SIB with 40% of the workforce benefiting from part-time contracts. Most positions can be filled on a part-time basis.

Flexibility and work-life balance is also linked to the home-office rule applied at SIB. Home-office has always been allowed at SIB but since the pandemic, it has been institutionalized, with a minimum number of days that should be worked from the office: 2 days a week for employees working 100%, 1 day per week for employees working less than 60%. Employees are thus eligible to a generous number of home-office days, helping to organize their personal life in a more convenient manner. Cross-border employees have a specific regime to ensure compliance with the agreements signed by Switzerland with neighboring countries.

In the case of employees with caring responsibilities (care of aging or sick family members or partners), the rule is simply to maintain a dialogue with the line manager, who will always try to find the best solution, balancing the desire to accommodate employees with caring responsibilities with the need to maintain the output level of the team. It is of course easier to address one-off situations with flexibility than recurrent cases. In the latter case, employees may need to discuss the possibility of temporarily reducing their working time to meet family needs. In any way, SIB's organizational culture is to avoid setting meetings too early or too late in the day to accommodate employees with caring responsibilities and help all balance their work-life responsibilities.

An anonymous satisfaction survey was carried out in 2022, in which 75% of SIB employees participated. An important part of the survey was dedicated to questions about equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The goal was to understand SIB employees' perception of their working environment.

- Overall, agreement with the different positive EDI-related statements was very high. 90% of the respondents agreed on the fact that SIB was respecting each individual person. Similar high agreement was received by statements concerning people from different backgrounds being accepted and made to feel welcome or the creation of a trusting environment.
- Only 7% of respondents disagreed that SIB is committed to ensuring that all employees are treated with equal respect and dignity, but no clear trend could explain this disagreement based on gender, origin, or age of the survey participants.

This survey led to an action plan shared between the People & Culture department, the Staff committee and the EDI working group. This survey will be renewed in the coming years.

General organizational processes also have great potential to balance gender differences and perceptions.

- SIB has implemented yearly mandatory feedback discussions for all employees and their manager to talk about achievements, objectives, and satisfaction at work. This is an opportunity to evaluate how workloads are allocated and distributed, how employees feel, how they wish to evolve and how the organization can help them achieve their personal goals considering each personal situation. It is also the occasion for employees to feel valued for their work and to spot potential differences of workload or responsibility levels between male and female employees.
- An effort is also made to use inclusive language in all institutional outputs, including online registration forms for events.

## 2. Gender balance in leadership and decision-making

- **Status in leadership and decision-making positions**

As shown in the table below, full equality in gender representation is not yet achieved in all governing bodies. The Foundation Council is made of representatives appointed by SIB's partner institutions, making it difficult for SIB to control gender balance of this body. But it remains an issue that can be brought to the attention of the presidency. Worth noting that despite this gender imbalance, the president of the Foundation Council, elected end of 2022, is a woman.

Management bodies	Number of female members	Number of male members
Senior Management Committee	5	7
Board of Directors	2	3
Foundation council	7	29

As of 31 Dec. 2023

Looking at gender distribution within the population of employees with people management responsibilities, 50% of them are women. This favorable distribution is kept as an objective when developing future managers.

	% of women	% of men	TOTAL
% Without people mgmt resp.	40,6	42,2	82,9
% With people mgmt resp.	8,6	8,6	17,1
TOTAL	49,2	50,8	100

- **Status in SIB conferences' scientific committees**

Since several years, SIB ensures that the scientific committee of its yearly conferences ([SIB days](#) or [BC2.ch](#)) is gender balanced. This includes a gender balanced core team, managing the conference programme, and a gender balanced panel of session chairs. Particular attention is also paid to developing a gender balanced speakers' programme as far as possible.

In 2023 [BC]<sup>2</sup> achieved equal representation of men and women in:

- **Session Chairs:** Balanced representation with 7 men and 7 women.
- **Scientific Committee Core Team:** An equal split of 2 men and 2 women.
- **Invited & Keynote Speakers:** Equally divided, featuring 5 men and 5 women.

Similarly, during the SIB days 2022 we maintained this balance with 8 men and 8 women chairs, a Core team of 3 women and 2 men, and an even distribution of invited and keynote speakers with 1 man and 1 woman.

### 3. Gender equality in recruitment and career progression

- **Recruitment process**

The SIB selection process pays constant and conscious attention to gender balance in the applicant pool and in the constitution of the recruitment panel.

All recruitments follow the same standardized process based on pre-established criteria, enabling all candidates for the same position to be assessed using the same set of questions.

In addition, once a candidate has been selected, the process of setting the newcomer's salary is standardized using a grid considering various variables, contributing to an equal treatment of all employees.

All employees with people management responsibilities have followed in 2022 and 2023 training on selection and management biases with a specific focus on gender inclusion. This was an opportunity to raise awareness of gender dynamics at play in interactions, why diversity is useful to increase efficiency in a team, and how to be successful in recruiting and managing a gender balanced team.

As far as salaries are concerned, a standard salary review process is implemented twice a year to ensure that promotions and bonuses are duly justified by managers and reviewed using the same methodology by the Senior Manager and Head of People & Culture department, who are trained to identify potential managerial bias.

- **Career development**

Only 37% of the "Senior", "Principal" or "Team Leader" positions are held by women. This situation is addressed by an active attention to promote women into middle management and senior technical positions, when opportunities arise (departures, creation of new positions, etc.) or when planning successions in a group. Among the 13 "head" and "director" positions, 6 are held by women and 7 are held by men. (figures as of 1 Jan. 2024)

SIB's internal culture including flexibility on part-time work and home-office as well as attention to caring responsibilities of employees or the implemented parental leave are additional factors to support the career progression of women at SIB.

SIB is also actively participating in specific international projects such as the ELIXIR Leadership And Diversity mentoring program (ELEAD). This program aims to empower women in the ELIXIR middle management to become mindful leaders and support them in their career growth.

- **Gender balance among participants to training courses**

When courses organised by SIB are oversubscribed, the Training group selects participants based on gender balance as well as other aspects like seniority, geographic.

## 4. Integration of the sex and gender dimensions into research and teaching content

The integration of the sex and gender dimensions into research is a challenge that requires policy changes at the level of national funding agencies. At the level of our institute, efforts are made to raise awareness on the biases that might exist in bioinformatics daily practices.

As examples, here are **initiatives undertaken** in this respect for the broad SIB network:

- A workshop was organized under the title "In all fairness: sex and gender biases in data science and AI, and how to address them", with a presentation by Davide Cirillo, head of the Machine Learning for Biomedical Research Unit at the Life Sciences Department of the Barcelona Supercomputing Center. The aim of this session was to increase the understanding of existing biases linked to sex and gender in bioinformatics and to come up with ideas on how to start addressing them. The participants engaged in discussions on questions such as "are protein and gene annotations unbiased"? "Is personalized medicine accounting for sex and gender biases by design"? "How can we test machine learning models for fairness"? Ultimately, the objective of this workshop was to lay the ground for future actions at SIB (e.g., specific training, written guidelines, ...) helping bioinformaticians to integrate the sex and gender dimension early on in their research programs, improving the scientific quality and the societal relevance of our work.
- The opening keynote of our community conference (biannually organized) SIB days in 2022 was [Antonella Santucciono Chadha](#) with a talk on "Sex and gender differences as a biological variant: the work of the Women's Brain Project." She enabled the audience to understand the influence of sex and gender on mental and brain diseases.

Work is still to be done to integrate the sex and gender dimensions into the datasets with which we work. We trust that building awareness is key to change practices.

**As concern conferences**, a checklist has been issued to foster gender balanced committees and scientific events. The goal of this checklist is to raise awareness on the topic among organizers, to highlight some realities associated with the goal of fostering diversity in the context of scientific events or committees regarding gender and to offer useful tips. Although the focus is on gender, there are many other dimensions of diversity that can be integrated to ensure the events are as inclusive as possible.

This checklist has been widely circulated among the Swiss bioinformatics community represented by SIB and is also sent to organisers of events requesting sponsoring by SIB. Efforts to reach gender balance among speakers in these events is also considered in the sponsoring decision made by our institute.

In the abstract selection process of our yearly scientific conference, the first reviewing is done without knowing the identity of the submitter (blind review) to avoid gender biases in evaluation. Guidelines are provided to harmonize submissions, and free training is offered to speakers to help them prepare. Monitoring of gender representation among submitters, accepted speakers and participants is carried out at each edition from 2020 to assess the situation and help address the most important discrepancies if any.

Childcare at the conference is also offered to those who need it.

Finally, a code of conduct has been enforced at each conference to promote respect and diversity.

**In our outreach activities**, we make sure to participate in workshops dedicated to girls organized in universities such as the biennial event [Enlarge your horizon](#) at UNIGE.

## 5. Measures against gender-based violence including sexual harassment

Measures against gender-based violence including sexual or psychological harassment have been implemented to offer a strong framework to prevent such situations and to enable a formal robust process to address them, should any such situation occur.

These policies are:

- SIB policy on protection of personal dignity
- SIB policy on conflict resolution

The aim of these policies is to ensure the protection of the victims of harassment thanks to a clear framework setting up responsibilities and ways to manage such situations.

These policies include the definition of:

- The unacceptable behaviors,
- The expected code of conduct,
- The points of contact where the victims or witnesses can raise the case,
- The process of resolution / investigation and disciplinary measures.

SIB also ensures, when informed, that every employee obtains support in case of personal dignity infringement.

Moreover, a permanent hotline for conflict mediation is available to all employees.

Reinforcing an open dialogue and raising awareness among employees is an important focus of our People & Culture department. Presentations and training sessions are organized on unconscious biases, and the EDI Working group ensures some dedicated events are accessible to all such as a viewing of and discussion around the famous movie 'Picture a scientist'.

SIB's Staff Committee also plays a key role. It is an additional entry point for employees who need to raise awareness of a particular situation as this committee is in regular contact with the executive management and the People and Culture department. It offers an additional mechanism that enables our institute not only to address specific cases, but also to adapt policies and actions and continue to promote and defend a gender-equal working environment.

## CONCLUSION

SIB is engaged in reaching gender balance in all its teams and activities, and to lead the way in addressing sex and gender biases in bioinformatics practices. In recent years, significant efforts have been made in the areas of equity, diversity, and inclusion, whether in terms of gender or other dimensions such as seniority, disability, or cultural diversity. SIB is firmly committed to continuing along this path and constantly monitors the results of its actions and policies to find the most efficient steps to take.

This document will be updated every year.