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1 Introduction and Commitment Statement

1.1 Purpose of this Plan

The Flanders Centre for Postharvest Technology (Vlaams Centrum voor Bewaring van Tuinbouwproducten, VCBT) is a research institute of approximately 15 permanent staff members plus 8 job students (8 person months per year), active in practical as well as basic research on quality and storage aspects of fresh fruit and vegetables and provides extension services to the Flemish growers. This Gender Equality Plan (GEP) sets out our institutional commitment to gender equality and describes the concrete, time-bound actions we will take to promote equal opportunities, prevent discrimination, and build an inclusive working environment for all staff, regardless of gender.

This Plan has been prepared to meet the eligibility requirements for Horizon Europe funding, which require public bodies, research organisations, and higher education institutions to have in place a Gender Equality Plan that is a formal, published document, endorsed by senior management, and that fulfils the process-related requirements and covers the thematic areas set out by the European Commission.

1.2 Our Institutional Context

As a small research institute, we recognise that gender equality measures must be proportionate to our size while remaining substantive and effective. Rather than establishing large committees, this Plan relies on clear individual responsibilities, integration of gender equality into existing management processes (recruitment, appraisal, planning meetings, management review), and the active involvement of all staff in an organisation where every person's contribution is visible and significant.

Where numeric targets are used in this Plan, they are set with awareness that small absolute numbers (e.g. a single hire or promotion) can shift percentages significantly. Targets are therefore expressed as directions of travel and minimum thresholds rather than rigid quotas, and are reviewed at each monitoring cycle.

1.3 Commitment Statement

The Flanders Centre for Postharvest Technology (Vlaams Centrum voor Bewaring van Tuinbouwproducten, VCBT) is committed to:

- Promoting a working culture of equality, respect, and non-discrimination for all staff, irrespective of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or other personal characteristics.
- Ensuring equal opportunities in recruitment, career progression, pay, and access to decision-making roles.
- Preventing and addressing gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination in the workplace.
- Integrating the gender dimension into our research content and outputs where relevant.
- Allocating dedicated resources, collecting data, and reporting transparently on progress against this Plan.

This Plan is formally endorsed by senior management and will be published on our institutional website.

[Signed]

Bart Nicolai
Director
Date: 1/9/2026

2 Policy Framework and the EC's Four Process-Related Requirements

This Plan is designed to satisfy the four mandatory process-related requirements set by the European Commission for a valid Gender Equality Plan:

- A formal document, publicly available on the organisation's website, signed by senior management (see Section 1.3).
- Dedicated resources and expertise to implement the Plan (see Section 3).
- Data collection and monitoring, with gender-disaggregated staff data reported annually (see Section 4).
- Training and awareness-raising on gender equality and unconscious bias for staff and management, especially those involved in recruitment and evaluation (see Section 5).

In addition, this Plan addresses four thematic areas recommended by the European Commission (Section 6): work-life balance and organisational culture; gender balance in leadership and decision-making; gender equality in recruitment and career progression; and measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment. The thematic area 'integration of the gender dimension into research content' is not relevant for our research being carried out.

3 Governance and Dedicated Resources

3.1 Roles and Responsibilities

Given the size of our organisation, governance of this Plan is kept lightweight but clearly assigned:

- Director: overall accountability for the Plan; signs off the Plan and its annual review; ensures budget and time are allocated.
- Gender Equality Coordinator Bert Verlinden: day-to-day responsibility for implementation, data collection, organising training, and acting as first point of contact for concerns; allocated approximately 0.5 person month for this role.
- All staff: expected to participate in training, complete anonymous surveys, and contribute to an annual review discussion of the Plan (feasible at our scale, given approximately 15 staff).

3.2 Dedicated Resources

Resource	Detail
Staff time	0.5 person month allocated to the Gender Equality Officer role
Budget line	€ 1000 per year for training, external expertise, surveys, or awareness materials
External expertise	Access to [national gender equality body / consultant / EU network] as needed
Reporting line	Gender Equality Officer reports to the Director at least twice a year

4 Data Collection and Monitoring

Given our small size, individual-level data must be handled with particular care for confidentiality. Where a category would contain fewer than 5 people, data will be reported qualitatively or aggregated over a longer period rather than broken down further, to avoid identifying individuals.

4.1 Indicators Collected Annually

Indicator	Breakdown	Source
Staff headcount	By gender, contract type (permanent/fixed-term), seniority level	HR / payroll records
New hires and applicants	By gender, at each recruitment stage (applied, shortlisted, interviewed, hired)	Recruitment records
Promotions / grade changes	By gender	HR records
Departures	By gender, reason where known (exit interview)	HR records
Salary	Gender pay gap check at comparable grades	Payroll (aggregated)
Leadership / decision-making roles	Gender composition of management, project leadership, boards, panels	Organisational records
Participation in training / conferences	By gender	Training records
Work-life balance measures uptake	Flexible working, parental leave, by gender	HR records
Staff perception	Annual anonymous survey on culture, inclusion, harassment	Survey

4.2 Baseline Data

The tables below were completed with current figures to establish the baseline against which progress will be measured.

Staff Headcount

Category	Women	Men	Other / Not disclosed	Total
Total staff	13	9	0	22
Senior researchers	3	1	0	4
Early-career researchers	3	1	0	4
Lab technicians	2	2	0	4
Job Students	4	4	0	8
Support / administrative staff	1	1	0	2

Gender pay gap

Category	Women	Men	Mean	Gender pay gap	%
Total staff	€ 4129	€ 3614	€ 3871	€ -515	-13.3 %

4.3 Monitoring Cycle

Data will be compiled annually by the Gender Equality Coordinator, reviewed with the Director, and discussed at an all-staff meeting. A short annual monitoring report will be published alongside this Plan on the institutional website.

5 Training and Awareness-Raising

All staff, and particularly those involved in recruitment, evaluation, or people management, will receive regular training on gender equality and unconscious bias.

Action	Indicator / Target	Timeline	Responsible
Onboarding: all new staff complete an introductory session on this Plan and the institute's equality, diversity and anti-harassment policies	100% of new starters within first month	Ongoing	Gender Equality Coordinator
All staff complete unconscious bias / gender equality awareness training	100% of staff trained at least once every 2 years	Year 1, repeated Year 3	Director / external trainer
Staff sitting on recruitment or evaluation panels complete specific bias-in-selection training before serving on a panel	100% of panel members trained before serving	Ongoing, before each recruitment round	Gender Equality Coordinator

6 Thematic Action Areas

The following five sections correspond to the thematic areas identified by the European Commission. For each area, objectives are translated into concrete actions with indicators, timelines, and responsible persons, scaled to a 15-person institute.

6.1 Work-Life Balance and Organisational Culture

Action	Indicator / Target	Timeline	Responsible
Review and formalise a flexible working / remote working policy applicable to all staff	Policy adopted and communicated to all staff	Q1–Q2 Year 1	Director
Ensure core meetings are scheduled within agreed core hours (e.g. 10:00–16:00) to support carers	No recurring meetings scheduled outside core hours without agreement	Ongoing from Year 1	All line managers
Clarify and communicate parental, family, and carer's leave entitlements to all staff	Guidance document circulated; 100% awareness confirmed via survey	Q2 Year 1	Gender Equality Coordinator
Run an annual anonymous culture and inclusion survey; act on findings	Survey completed annually; action plan published in response	Annually	Gender Equality Coordinator / Director

6.2 Gender Balance in Leadership and Decision-Making

Action	Indicator / Target	Timeline	Responsible
Monitor gender composition of management, project leadership roles, and any advisory/governing bodies	Reported annually in monitoring report	Annually	Gender Equality Coordinator
Ensure gender-balanced shortlists (where feasible at our scale) when appointing internal leads (e.g. work-package or project leaders)	Balanced consideration documented for each appointment	Ongoing from Year 1	Director

Actively encourage and support under-represented genders to apply for leadership opportunities, conference talks, and external representation roles	At least proportional representation in external-facing roles relative to staff composition	Ongoing	Director
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6.3 Gender Equality in Recruitment and Career Progression

Action	Indicator / Target	Timeline	Responsible
Use gender-neutral language and inclusive channels in all job advertisements	100% of ads reviewed against a gender-neutral language checklist before posting	From Year 1	Gender Equality Coordinator
Ensure recruitment and interview panels include more than one person and, where feasible, mixed-gender composition	Documented for each recruitment process	From Year 1	Director
Introduce transparent, written criteria for promotion/progression decisions	Criteria document adopted and shared with all staff	Q3 Year 1	Director
Conduct a periodic pay comparison by gender at comparable grades and address unexplained gaps	Review completed annually; any gap explained or an action taken	Annually	Director
Ensure fair access to training, conference travel and mentoring opportunities regardless of gender or part-time status	Uptake data reviewed annually by gender	Annually	Gender Equality Coordinator

6.4 Measures Against Gender-Based Violence, Including Sexual Harassment

Action	Indicator / Target	Timeline	Responsible
Adopt a clear anti-harassment and anti-violence policy, including definitions, reporting channels, and sanctions	Policy adopted, published internally and (in summary) externally	Q1 Year 1	Director
Designate a confidential, independent contact person for reporting concerns, distinct from line-management structure where possible	Contact person named and communicated to all staff	Q1 Year 1	Director
Ensure all staff are informed of the policy and reporting channels, including at onboarding	100% staff awareness confirmed via survey	From Year 1, ongoing	Gender Equality Coordinator
Provide a channel for anonymous reporting/feedback in addition to direct reporting	Anonymous channel available and tested	Q2 Year 1	Gender Equality Coordinator
Review any reported cases (in anonymised/aggregate form) and the effectiveness of the policy annually	Annual review completed; policy updated if needed	Annually	Director