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Introduction

A Gender Equality Plan (GEP) is a set of commitments and actions that aim to promote gender equality in the workplace, through a process of structural change. Therefore, this GEP encourages self-reflection and an ongoing review of processes and practices within Optimal (*Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans*, n.d.), focusing on:

- Identifying objectives,
- Necessary actions, and
- Measures to address gender disparities.

Co-relation with Optimal' s Values

The establishment of a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) at Optimal is increasingly relevant to the organization's fundamental values. These values namely: **integrity**, **collaboration**, **inclusivity**, **sustainability**, and **continuous improvement** and each of them plays a unique and critical role in addressing gender disparities within the workplace while it aligns with globally recognized standards for promoting gender equality.

- **Integrity** in Optimal' s framework fosters a culture of openness and accountability. It ensures among others that action is being taken to promote gender equality while respecting ethical principles, allowing Optimal to commit to transparent processes and fair evaluations.
- **Collaboration** is essential for promoting active engagement among employees at all levels. Optimal acknowledges that achieving gender equality is not solely the responsibility of a designated person or the top management but entails collective effort from each department and every person within the organization. Research supports this view, and it shows that collaborative initiatives can strengthen the execution of the GEP by integrating diverse perspectives across social status, age or any other created division and encouraging shared ownership of gender equality initiatives (Andrade, 2022; Fine et al., 2019). Team-oriented approaches to equality and diversity are most effective in environments where collaboration is prevalent (Begeny et al., 2020).
- **Inclusivity** ensures that all employees, regardless of gender, feel valued and empowered within the organization. Optimal' s commitment to inclusivity embraces among others the richness that diverse experiences, backgrounds and contributions bring to its workforce, significantly enriching the organizational culture and enhancing performance. As also highlighted in relevant research from institutions in Canada and Japan (Gupta et al., 2022; Taka et al., 2016), this value is critical for fostering an environment that supports equal access to development opportunities and career advancement. It is also essential for maintaining the organization's financial sustainability and ongoing success.
- **Financial Sustainability**, reflecting Optimal' s long-term vision, where integrating Equality, resonates and reflects Optimal' s variability in maintaining its financial resilience by incorporating ongoing improvement in its practices, equity, equality, transparency etc. Gender Equality is a fundamental element of achieving and maintaining financial sustainability. Optimal is following a worldwide set of standards and principles highlighting the longevity and financial independence of organizations that foster Gender Equality practices to their workforce (Binagwaho et al., 2021; Kelley et al., 2024).
- **Continuous improvement:**
Under the spectrum of all Optimal' s values it's incorporated the dedication to continuous improvement. self-reflection and the ongoing review of its processes and practices in a circle for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of its strategies - as provided by Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans document (*Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans*, n.d., p. 14).

Continuous improvement fosters a dynamic workplace culture that prioritizes learning and adaptation, thereby facilitating the effective implementation of the GEP (Ahmad et al., 2023).

These values collectively provide a robust framework for establishing the GEP and demonstrate Optimal's commitment to cultivating an equitable workplace culture aligning with recognized practices in gender equality (Sultan & Kamran, 2011).

Therefore, GEP is part of the Optimal's efforts to continuously align its practices with evolving regulatory frameworks, notably those set forth by the European Union (EU), that enable access to research programs and continuous innovation strategies for Optimal itself and its partners (Campá & Sanahuja, 2023; Moravčević et al., 2023).

Integration of GEP and Goals

At the heart of a GEP is the integration of gender equality principles into organizational policies and practices. This ensures that both men and women have equal rights and opportunities irrespective of their gender. This recognition not only enriches workplace culture but also enhances organizational performance by creating a more cohesive and dynamic workforce (Bencivenga et al., 2021; Tzanakou et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that gender-diverse teams often produce superior outcomes due to the broad range of perspectives and experiences that can be leveraged (Vélez et al., 2022).

Understanding fundamental concepts related to gender issues, such as gender equity, intersectionality, and institutional change, is essential for developing and operationalizing a GEP. These key terms inform the strategic actions necessary for creating an organizational structure that genuinely reflects a commitment to gender equality (Cavaghan, 2016; Vélez et al., 2022). Intersectionality, for instance, considers how different social categorizations, such as race, class, and gender, overlap, affecting individual experiences and, by extension, organizational dynamics. Recognizing these intersections is vital for crafting policies that are equitable and inclusive, thereby promoting a culture of respect and understanding among all employees.

Lastly, a well-designed GEP not only seeks to rectify pre-existing inequalities but also aspires to foster a sustainable culture of inclusion and respect within the organization, aligning it with the best global practices for equitable development (Kim & O'Connor, 2009). As uniquely illustrated in the context of EU-funded projects, such as Horizon 2020, there is a concerted effort not just to implement GEPs but to ensure they contribute to significant structural changes within research and higher education institutions (Campá & Sanahuja, 2023; Moravčević et al., 2023). This holistic approach underscores the necessity of GEPs as pivotal frameworks for advancing gender equality in contemporary organizational contexts.

Legislation

It is important to note that **Optimal, as a private-for-profit, stock-listed company, is not legally required to have a Gender Equality Plan as an eligibility criterion for Horizon Europe funding.** However Optimal's establishment and implementation of this GEP is a **voluntary commitment, driven by its core values and overall strategic plan**, rather than a mandatory compliance requirement for specific EU funding.

International Regulatory Framework: Gender equality is universally recognized as a human right, upheld by numerous **International Treaties** such as the Charter of the United Nations (1945), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW - 1979). It is also reinforced by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul, 2011).

Furthermore, **International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions** (e.g., 100, 103, 111, 156) address maternity protection and facilitate employability for workers with family responsibilities.

European Union Law: EU treaties, such as the **Treaty of Rome (1957)** and the **Treaty of Amsterdam (1999)**, have progressively introduced the principle of gender equality and the elimination of sex-based discrimination. Key provisions include:

- **Article 157 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU):** This mandates that each Member State ensures **equal pay for male and female workers for equal work or work of equal value**. "Pay" encompasses basic wage/salary and any other consideration received from the employer. It explicitly states that pay for piece rates or time rates must be calculated on the same basis for the same work. The European Parliament and Council are tasked with adopting measures to ensure equal opportunities and treatment in employment and occupation, including equal pay. Member States can also adopt measures providing specific advantages to the underrepresented sex to promote vocational activity or compensate for career disadvantages.
- **Chapter of Fundamental Rights of the EU:**
 - **Article 21(1)** broadly prohibits **discrimination based on any ground**, including sex, race, ethnic origin, disability, age, or sexual orientation.
 - **Article 23** specifically demands **equality between women and men in all areas**, including employment, work, and pay. It also permits measures that provide specific advantages for the underrepresented sex. These EU regulations and directives directly promote gender equality in the workplace and employment.

National Legislation (e.g., Greek Law, applicable to entities operating in Greece): The Greek legal framework also robustly supports gender equality:

- **Constitution:**
 - **Article 4(2)** ensures **equal rights and obligations for Greek men and women**.
 - **Article 22(1)(b)** guarantees **equal pay for work of equal value** for all workers, regardless of sex or other distinctions.
 - **Article 116(2)** states that **positive measures** to promote equality between men and women do not constitute discrimination. The State is obliged to take steps to eliminate practical inequalities, especially those detrimental to women. This article permits the use of **quotas** to increase women's participation in decision-making and research centers, such as the minimum 1/3 representation in national and Research and Technology Committees, provided candidates are qualified.
- **Laws:** Greece has enacted several laws to implement these principles, crucial for Human Resource companies and general business operations:
 - **Act 4808/2021** focuses on **protection against violence and harassment in the workplace**, aligning with ILO Convention 190, and promotes work-life balance (Directive EU 2019/1158). This Act and its ministerial decisions establish a modern framework for a respectful work environment, free from violence and harassment in both public and wider public sectors. This is especially relevant for Human Resource companies that manage workplace conduct.
 - **Act 4604/2019** specifically addresses the **promotion of substantive gender equality**. This law also led to the publication of the National Gender Equality Plan in 2021, which outlines priority areas such as combating gender-based violence, ensuring equal participation in the labor market and decision-making, and mainstreaming gender perspectives into policies.
 - **Act 4443/2016** transposes EU Directives (2000/43/EC, 2000/78/EC, 2014/54/EU) on **equal treatment irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, and for employment and occupation**.

- **Act 4097/2012** harmonizes legislation with Directive 2010/41/EU concerning **equal treatment for self-employed men and women**.
- **Act 4075/2012** incorporates Directive 2010/18/EU on **parental leave** into Greek law.
- **Act 3896/2010** harmonizes existing legislation with Directive 2006/54/EC, implementing the principle of **equal treatment in employment and occupation**. This act repealed earlier Presidential Decrees (105/2003 and 87/2002) related to the burden of proof in sex discrimination cases and equal treatment in occupational social security schemes.
- **Act 3488/2006** transposes Directive 2002/73/EC, focusing on **equal treatment in access to employment, professional training, career progression, and working conditions**.
- **Act 1414/1984** transposed Directives 75/117/EEC and 76/207/EEC, implementing the principle of **equal treatment of sexes in employment relationships**.
- **Act 4531/2018** ratifies the **Istanbul Convention**, which sets legally binding criteria for preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, calling for it to be recognized as an EU crime.
- **Act 4491/2017** provides for the **legal recognition of gender identity**.

While not obliged to have a Gender Equality Plan, **private-for-profit, stock-listed companies (S.A.s)** like Optimal, adherence to these laws is critical. Optimal S.A. for example is bound by the broader legal framework promoting gender equality in all aspects of employment and business operations, encompassing policies for recruitment, working conditions, career progression, and protection against gender-based violence.

Optimal' s Gender Equality Plan

Optimal' s Gender Equality Plan is aligned to the four mandatory requirements as stated at (*Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans*, n.d., pp. 5–6):

- i. it is a public document, approved by the top management (Mr. Menelaos Kyriakopoulos) and published on Optimal' s website
- ii. it has dedicated resources
- iii. it includes arrangements for data collection and monitoring
- iv. it is supported by training

The objective of this initiative is to cultivate a informed gender-aware organizational culture by effecting a shift in conventional perceptions across all levels of staff. The subsequent sections will concentrate on the following key areas from the options offered on the report's 6th page:

1. Work Life balance as part of the organization's culture
2. Gender balance in leadership of departments and decision making
3. Gender equality in career progression
4. Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment

The objectives, measures, indicators, Responsible Departments/ People and the timeframe are described in the following pages.

The organizational structure of Optimal and the departments as they are going to be described below can be depicted in the following chart.

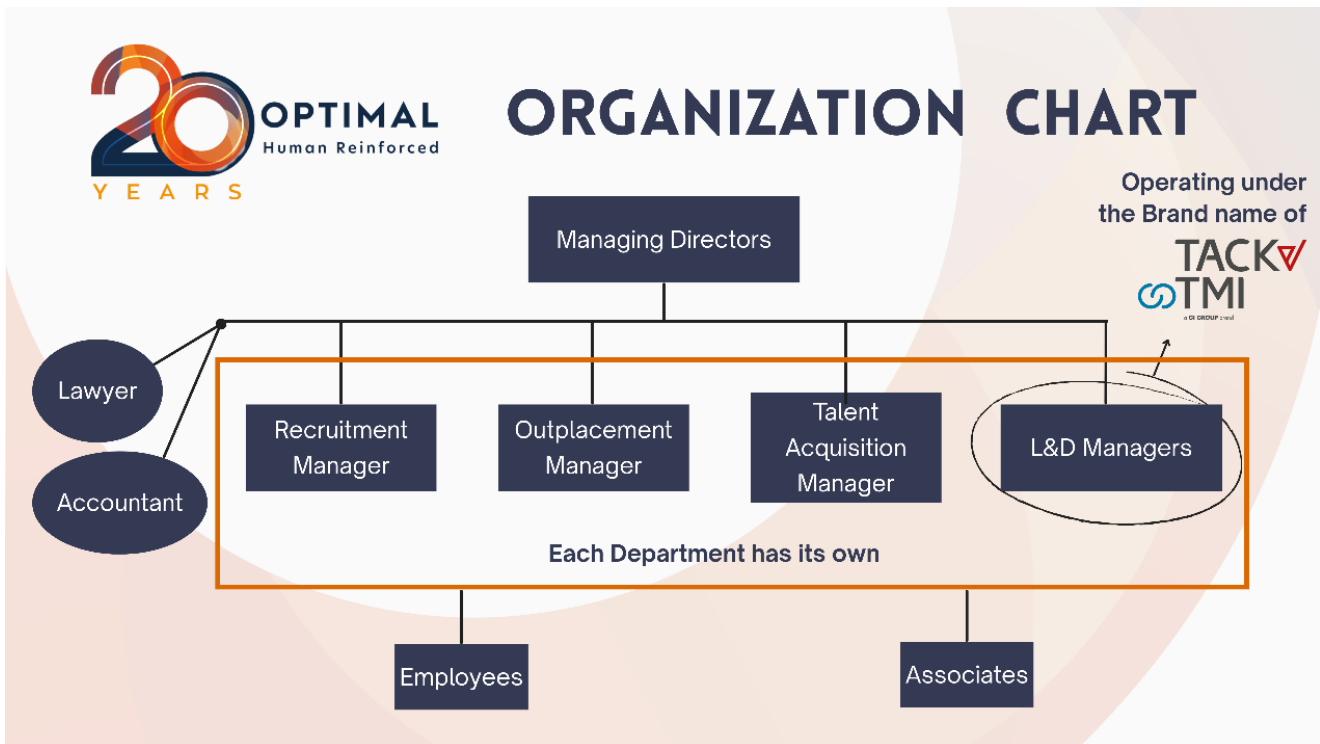


Figure 1 Optimal's Organization Chart

Data Collected

To identify the current status (July 2025) of the gender equality practices in Optimal's workforce, the following practices were used:

- Aggregation of the woman/man personnel data for the year 2024 and 2025 across all divisions
- Aggregation of the composition of the management levels for the year 2024 and 2025

Table 1: Gender Distribution in Total Workforce

GENDER DISTRIBUTION	Total Number in 2025	Quantitate difference	Total Percentage (right now)
MAN	15	-15	33.3%
WOMAN	30	+15	66.7%
TOTAL	45		100%

The total number of our workforce is 45, of which 15 (33.3%) are men and 30 (66.7%) are women.

Chart 1: Gender distribution in Optimal's workforce

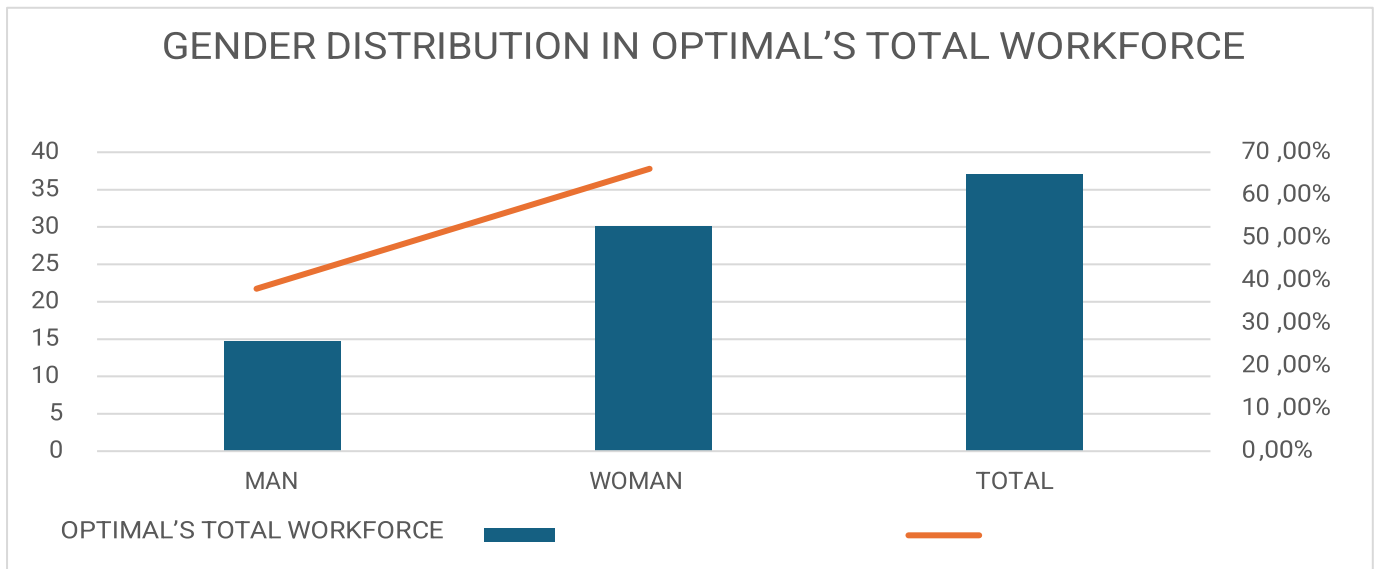


Table 3: Gender Distribution by Management Levels

GENDER DISTRIBUTION BY MANAGEMENT LEVEL				
GENDER DISTRIBUTION	LEADERS AND DECISION MAKERS		EMPLOYEES	
MAN	5	62.5%	10	27.0%
WOMAN	3	37.5%	27	73.0%
TOTAL	8	100%	37	100%

Regarding gender distribution by management levels, 5 out of 8 directors are men, which corresponds to 62.5% of higher managerial staff (department directors).

On the department management level, women outrank men: 6 out of 9 managers are women, which corresponds to 66.7%, while a perfect gender balance exists in the Legal Advisor Office (1 man and 1 woman; 50% each).

Therefore, the middle and higher managerial staff is gender balanced overall: 9 out of 17 higher hierarchy positions are held by women, which corresponds to 52.9%.

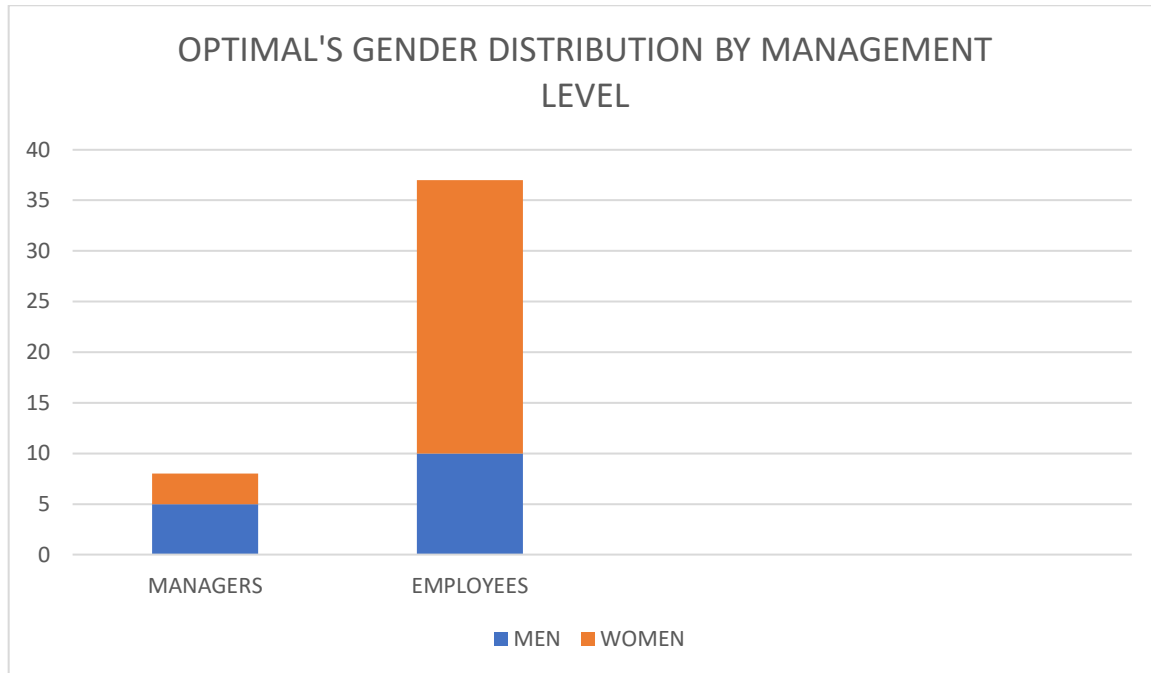


Chart 3: Gender Distribution By Management Levels

Table 4: People in parental leave

PARENTAL LEAVE	Total Number in 2025	People in Parental Leave	Percentage (right now)
MAN	15	0	
WOMAN	30	4	13.33%
TOTAL	45	4	8.89%

The total number of people in parental leave is 4 women, which marks 13.33% if comparable of the total number of women in the company and 8.89% compared to the total workforce number.

Training Access

Training Access and Development opportunities are kindly offered to the total of employees with differentiation only when it comes to managerial levels and leadership programs.

Harassment Cases

As of the records of the past 4 years, there are no reported harassment cases within Optimal neither by men or women.

KPIs and Plan

The key thematic areas in which the KPIs were formed are the following:

1. Work Life balance as part of the organization's culture
2. Gender balance in leadership of departments and decision making
3. Gender equality in career progression
4. Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment

The table with the corresponding number refers to this KPIs Objectives, Measures Indicators and Implementation Plan throughout the next years.

Key area 1: Work Life balance as part of the organization's culture				
Objectives	Measures	2024	2025	2026
Objectives Promote integration of work with family life Incentives for supporting personnel with caring responsibilities	Measures Promote flexible working models for those who need them (parental leave etc) to the maximum extent		✓	✓
	Identify & establish suitable benefits for personnel (special leave when family members are hospitalised etc)		✓	✓
	Work from home flexibility and allowance		✓	✓
Responsible Departments/ People HR/ Administration-Finance Division CEO Administrative Council	Indicators 1. Number of employees on an annual basis 2. Work from home days annual percentage			

Key area 2: Gender balance in leadership of departments and decision making					
Objectives	Measures	2024	2025	2026	
Gender balance in decision making bodies (when applicable)	Support women's participation in decision bodies (when applicable). Implementation of the existing quota system (when applicable)		√	√	
	Equality, diversity and inclusion principles embedded into governance and annual strategic planning		√	√	
Responsible Departments/ People All divisions CEOs	Indicators 1. Number of women managers/total amount of managers on an annual basis 2. Number of measures in the strategic plan on an annual basis				

Key area 3: Gender equality in career progression, events and activities					
Objectives	Measures	2024	2025	2026	
To gender proof career advancement within the organisation	Analysis of data of current year for senior positions versus data of previous years		√	√	
Balanced participation of men/women in events, courses, activities	Monitoring participation of men/women in the organisational events, activities		√	√	
Responsible Departments/ People HR	Indicators 1. Number of women managers over total number of managers per year 2. Number of men/ women participating per year				

Key area 4: Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment

Objectives	Measures	2024	2025	2026
Increase gender equality awareness within the organisation Use of non-sexist language in official correspondence	Promotion of training initiatives regarding gender equality		✓	✓
	Encourage personnel to report gender incidents			
	Proof check that non-sexist language is used in formal correspondence			
Responsible Departments/ People HR/Administration & Finance Division CEO Administrative Council	Indicators 1. Documentation of training (number of training activities, number of participants on an annual basis) 2. Non-sexist language in all documents and digital material			

Review

This Gender Equality Plan will undergo a 360-degree evaluation on an annual basis, conducted by the HR department of Optimal under the supervision of Ms. Vicky Paroni, signed by Mr. Menelaos Kyriakopoulos. The evaluation will encompass both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data will be used to assess the KPIs, being collected through employee surveys. The qualitative data will provide a comprehensive picture of the procurement progress across employees and departments, and it will be collected through employee interviews. The next 360-degree evaluation of data and KPIs will be held on July 2026.

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