vliruos

sharing minds, changing lives

Gender Policy

VLIRUOS Gender Policy

1. Background and Purpose of this Policy

As the operational agency of the Flemish Rectors' Conference (VLIR), VLIRUOS is the leading funding body for scholarships and partnerships between academics from Flanders and partner institutions in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, focused on global sustainable development.

VLIRUOS takes on different roles:

- **As a grant manager,** we develop and oversee a diverse portfolio of grant programmes designed to foster equitable partnerships between Flemish higher education institutions, academics, their peers in the Global South, and other stakeholders. Our portfolio includes established programmes while also providing opportunities for pioneering and innovation.
- **As a platform**, we bring together diverse groups to build multi-stakeholder partnerships and networks, empowering them to act as drivers and agents of change.
- **As a knowledge hub**, we create, pool, and mobilise knowledge and best practices for global sustainable development.

This VLIRUOS policy represents the organisation's commitment to contribute to more gender equality by mainstreaming gender. The policy is also considered as an instrument for conducting a dialogue with partners on gender sensitive issues and for putting gender on the agenda. The gender policy has a double focus: on programmes (partnerships and scholarships) on the one hand, and the organisation VLIRUOS on the other. The gender policy is a first step in the development of a broader VLIRUOS policy on diversity, equity and inclusion.

More information on our vision, mission and values is available on https://www.vliruos.be/about/vision-mission-values

2. Scope of the Policy

This policy puts forward the commitment of VLIRUOS, the rectors of the Flemish universities and general directors the universities of applied sciences and arts, the Bureau UOS and the VLIRUOS direction and staff to strive for more gender equality, at the level of fixing the numbers, fixing the knowledge and fixing the organisation (based on the theoretical 3-fixes-model as developed by Londa Schiebinger).

This document reflects the complexity of VLIRUOS as an umbrella organisation which does not implement projects itself. VLIRUOS sets out the framework for Flemish academic cooperation for global sustainable development. Higher education institutions in Flanders and the partner countries implement the projects.

The focus in this policy is on the organisation of VLIRUOS, its different roles (grant manager, platform and knowledge hub), the projects and the scholarships.

3. Our Policy

VLIRUOS approved its gender policy for 2020-2024 on 3 July 2020. The **VLIRUOS Gender Policy** promotes gender equality by embedding gender considerations into all partnerships. It addresses gender imbalances in academia and cooperation for development. Women are underrepresented in academia, especially in senior positions and certain regions. The policy supports SDG 5 and prioritises equal opportunities, considering the intersection of gender with other social factors to ensure sustainable and inclusive impact. Aligned with the 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development, it emphasises the "Leave No One Behind" principle and integrates gender into all aspects of the VLIRUOS work.

The policy adopts a 3-fixes model to enhance gender representation and inclusion:

1. **Fixing the numbers**: Ensuring a 40-60% gender balance in scholarships and partnerships, with special attention to regional differences.
2. **Fixing the knowledge**: Promoting gender-sensitive research, providing gender trainings and ensuring that gender awareness is incorporated throughout the project cycle.
3. **Fixing the organisation**: Encouraging gender-sensitive practices within VLIRUOS and its partners, including improving gender balance in leadership roles.

The policy also includes commitments to regularly monitor gender data, raise awareness, support women's empowerment, and adopt a two-track approach that combines gender-specific initiatives with mainstreaming gender in all partnerships.

Future efforts will focus on expanding the gender policy and practices to also diversity, intersectionality, and inclusion in all operations, including the topic of decolonization.

In the future VLIRUOS will continue to put forward the following commitments which will be strived for, at the level of fixing the numbers, fixing the knowledge and fixing the organisation:

3.1. Fix the numbers

Available data & yearly monitoring

We make sure that data are available for tracking the numbers, at all levels: scholarships, projects and partnerships, and at the level of the organisation. Further evidence and study are needed for additional evidence-based policy decisions. Examples are the family situation of scholars who are selected, but also from scholars who applied but who did not meet the selection criteria, the reasons why female academics prefer to take up supporting roles in the Institutional University Cooperation (IUC) projects instead of leading positions.

Yearly monitoring happens at the level of VLIRUOS, based on information that the (Flemish and partner) institutions involved need to provide to VLIRUOS.

Gender equality is part of all project calls (e.g. relating to impact and sustainability). Applicants must explain how the project strategy integrates the SDG principle 'Leave no one behind', with due attention for the integration of gender.

Partners are explicitly asked to report yearly on the progress they make towards gender equality. For example:

- Progress towards implementation of the 'Leave no one Behind' principle and gender equity
- Number of students enrolled/graduated
- Gender of the first author of peer reviewed articles
- Number of newly established or revised institutional policies, rules and regulations with a focus on gender

VLIRUOS will use this data in future analyses for learning and steering (e.g. analysis of gender in selections).

40-60% guideline for all scholarships in educational programmes and projects

The procedure for selecting scholarships for the ICP Connect projects stipulates that the organisers should attempt to meet a relative gender balance among scholarship holders.

The existing guideline from the scholarship programme is set as an example for scholarship attribution within projects too, putting forward a minimum share of 40% for persons from the underrepresented sex. The role of VLIRUOS for these types of scholarships is to raise awareness towards the Flemish and Global South partners responsible for selections and to collect the necessary data for monitoring the implementation of the guideline at portfolio level. Special attention is given to raise awareness on regional differences between Africa, Asia and Latin-America, with a focus on promoting the participation of African female scholars.

Within the Institutional University Cooperation (IUC) projects, which have a long duration, special attention is devoted to gender, diversity and inclusion both at the level of project holders (coordinator, programme manager, team leaders) and of scholars.

Advanced master, 45 as age limit

We raised the age limit of 40 years to 45 years for the Advanced Master Programmes' scholarships, for men and women. We know from research specifically for female African scholars, that young women in the lower academic ranks are less physically international and career wise mobile than men in the same age group and rank. This gender difference in international mobility, however, decreases as age increases.

Mobilisation of academics who have no prior experience with VLIRUOS

A specific objective of VLIRUOS is to mobilise academics who have no prior experience with VLIRUOS to engage in "sharing minds, changing lives", with specific focus on first time promoters/young academics but also on female academics. For this reason, the number of project (proposals) per promoter has been limited for specific projects such as Short Initiatives and TEAM. In case of an ex aequo ranking in the selection of projects, preference will be given to academics without prior experience with VLIRUOS, to projects coordinated by academics from the underrepresented sex in their sector, and/or to gender-specific projects.

50-50% gender representation within Bureau UOS

According to the VLIRUOS statutes, each HEI should be represented by a woman and a man within the Bureau UOS. This gender balance has been realised at the level of the Bureau UOS as of September 2021. This has led to an increased number of Bureau UOS members thus also contributing to more diversity in profiles of Bureau UOS members, being a mix of experienced project promoters and policy makers.

Composition of selection commissions

Project proposals are assessed and selected by independent selection commissions. There are clear criteria as to the competences of individual commissions as well as balances at the level of the commissions as a whole. For the composition of these commissions, a gender balance is required= minimally 25-75% and preferably 50-50%, as well as a balance as to experts originating from Global South and Global North countries.

Staff policy within VLIRUOS

VLIRUOS has a policy of positive action, When, after a selection process, two equally qualified candidates remain, preference will be given to the candidate from the underrepresented gender. This action will only be applied when there is a clear underrepresentation of one of the genders.

3.2. Fix the knowledge

3.2.1. Structural 2-track approach

VLIRUOS structurally integrates a 2-track approach. These 2 tracks consist of integrating gender into projects where gender equality is not the main objective and combining this with projects aimed primarily at promoting gender equality or women's empowerment. Gender mainstreaming is about taking gender into account throughout all domains of research and/or education, all different types of projects, all phases in the project cycle, all policy and strategy documents etc. and not just where it seems obvious, like only in social sciences. The perspective of gender is always relevant, no matter the sector or discipline, since our focus of work is capacity building for global sustainable development. Gender is inherent to both concepts. Capacity building involves people, sustainable development leaves no one behind. The next two paragraphs detail for each track the engagements put forward.

The selection commissions are a crucial factor in realising the VLIRUOS ambition to strive for more gender balance. They receive training on the VLIRUOS gender policy, how this has been translated into the set of selection criteria and descriptors and how they as commissions members should deal with it.

3.2.1.1. Strive for a minimum share of gender equality projects

For the projects with gender equality as main objective, we strive for a minimum share of these projects in the VLIRUOS portfolio. 10% was proposed but this now seems unrealistic. Rather than the exact figure it is the ambition which is important: this share is considered as an incentive in all our calls for proposals in order to sensitize and stimulate. The selection commissions are a crucial factor. In case we do not reach a given share by the end of a Five-Year Programme, a policy-initiated call for gender specific projects might give the necessary boost for this type of projects.

3.2.1.2. Mainstreaming gender

Support for mainstreaming gender

For all projects, VLIRUOS invests in providing training and support to academics to strengthen capacities to effectively mainstream gender into VLIRUOS projects, going further than asking academics to simply fill in the box on gender in the formats. An example of this is the flash card on gender which is part of VLIRUOS calls.

Gender expertise within individual projects

Projects should acknowledge having read the VLIRUOS gender policy and consider the inclusion of a local gender expert in the project team or the creation of a local gender taskforce at partner institution level for advice on cultural barriers and sensitiveness in the local context. Regarding stakeholder engagement, projects are expected to provide a stakeholder and uptake strategy when formulating a proposal and should consider women groups in advisory boards, but also men to challenge stereotypes related to gender and diversity and prevent discriminatory practices.

Mainstreaming gender within IUC projects

Gender is structurally mainstreamed in the Institutional University Cooperation (IUC) projects. These are long-term institutional cooperation projects between a university in a partner country and Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts. The strategy should focus on enabling a change process within the partner university leading and strengthening educational and research capacities via different academic theme based sub-projects.

Accelerate on gender

VLIRUOS aims to strengthen its approach on diversity, equity and inclusion (encompassing gender) in all dimensions of its portfolio and organisation, offering evidence based and effective tools. For this reason, VLIRUOS designed a new programme "Accelerate" in 2024 for which a call for proposals was launched for three specific topics: (i) higher education management, (ii) diversity, equity and inclusion, and (iii) impact.

Through Accelerate, VLIRUOS strives, for each of the three topics, to contribute to policy development, toolbox development and trainings.

As to diversity, equity and inclusion, objectives are the following:

1. To develop an updated and integrated evidence-based policy,
2. To develop at least two concrete policy implementation pathways focused on supporting a better integration,
3. To develop and implement a train-the-trainer programme on DE&I within the VLIRUOS portfolio and networking activities.

Through the Accelerate programme, VLIRUOS wishes to accelerate the further development and implementation of its policy on DE&I and gender within VLIRUOS projects and VLIRUOS as organisation.

3.3. Fix the organisation

3.3.1. Equality and Inclusion policy

This gender policy is the first part of an Equality and Inclusion policy and is based on the Agenda 2030 principle of Leaving No One Behind. This policy is published on the VLIRUOS website. VLIRUOS ensures that the policy is standard knowledge for Bureau UOS members, selection commission members, the relevant staff of universities and universities of applied sciences and arts (ICOS and GEO) and VLIRUOS staff. On their turn, they support individual academics who want to get involved in academic cooperation for global sustainable development.

3.3.2. Mainstreaming gender equity through the implementation of the SGD principle 'Leave no one behind' (LNOB)

Agenda 2030 and the SDGs have been used in the context of the design of the latest five-year programmes, as a framework for renewing the mission and vision of VLIRUOS, for updating the theory of change, for elaborating a country framework and for reworking the portfolio. The underlying principles of « Leaving no one behind » and « Inclusiveness » (next to multistakeholder partnership and interconnectedness) have explicitly been put forward. The concept of intersectionality clearly links with these principles.

VLIRUOS recognises the need for pro-active strategies to ensure that vulnerable and marginalised populations are included and benefit from higher education partnerships for sustainable development. The LNOB principle is taken into account by looking at partners with whom we work, at beneficiaries for whom we work, and what we focus on in projects. VLIRUOS encourages projects to take gender and vulnerable groups into account, by putting forward partnerships with mid-range or small-scale institutions, by awarding scholarships to a diversified group of beneficiaries, and by promoting transformative or community-based types of research. More precisely, international top higher education institutions are only considered when they participate as supporting partners in projects, scholarship attribution is not only based on academic excellence in terms of scientific output, and mainstreaming approaches are put in place to consider inclusion and (gender) equality in each project.

When formulating an IUC, for example, gender mainstreaming is prioritized not just in numbers but also within the organisation. This is reflected in actions such as updating or establishing an institutional gender policy, appointing a gender focal point or committee, and integrating gender and diversity into the content proposals of the IUC project.

3.3.3. Engagement of all levels

We consider equality and inclusion as an engagement of all levels, ranging from the VLIRUOS office up to the rectors of the universities and general directors of the universities of applied sciences and arts and of course at the level of the Bureau UOS. At all levels a better gender and diversity balance is strived for.

The engagement also concerns the whole organisation and not only the Gender focal point (see also 4.), as there are clear links with the communication manager (e.g. for using female scholars as role models in communication and for communicating in a gender-neutral way), the information manager (data collection), the management team (e.g. when recruiting, in HR policy, ...), etc.

Each selection commission must be a mix of profiles and must contain in depth knowledge about gender.

But the engagement should also be taken by the Flemish and Southern project promoters.

3.3.4. Collaboration

VLIRUOS participates in different advice and working groups, situated within the context of development and HEI organisations, for example. the advisory council on gender and development (ARGO), Educaid, VLIR gender commission, ...

4. Roles and responsibilities

4.1. Focal point

VLIRUOS has appointed a focal point on gender. This person acts as an organisation-wide expert and advisor. They are responsible, alongside the management team, for ensuring that gender is not merely a side objective but a core part of how VLIRUOS operates and achieves its mission. The focal point:

- Documents and maintains the gender policy.
- Ensures the communication and understanding of the policy by concerned parties.
- Coordinates and oversees the documentation and maintenance of related working procedures.
- Supports the Accelerate expert group in its mission to formulate policy proposals, implementation pathways and train-the-trainer programmes.
- Follows the evolution on gender in the policies of HEIs.
- Represents VLIRUOS in relevant external bodies.
- Supports the expansion of the gender policy to also a diversity, equity and inclusion policy by relevant external bodies.
- Communicates about changes or updates to this policy.

4.2. Management team

Ensures the implementation of the policy within their teams and the organisation at large, supported by the focal point.

4.3. Governance Accelerate project

The new Accelerate programme, which has also a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (encompassing gender) has the following governance: a core team (a Flemish and local coordinator), the consortium group (the broader group of experts (academics, staff, scholarship holders, etc.) responsible for implementing activities under the various objectives) and a steering committee (the core group members of each Accelerate project, the

VLIRUOS programme manager responsible for Accelerate and/or the programme manager for the respective theme). The respective Accelerate group for diversity, equity and inclusion will replace the expert group.

5. Related Legislation and Charters

- The law of 19 March 2013 on Belgian Development Cooperation, as amended to date;
- The Royal Decree of 11 September 2016 on the Non-Governmental Cooperation, as amended to date, whereby the Royal Decree of 7 October 2021 authorises five-year programmes of institutional actors, among which VLIR, to start on 1 September instead of on 1 January, and to stop on 31 August instead of on 31 December;
- Federaal Plan Gender Mainstreaming 2020-2024

6. Document Information and Revision History

Lead	Focal point
Version number	V2.0
Date of approval	October 2024
Next review date	Academic year 2026-2027
Associated VLIRUOS policies and frameworks	• Transversal and priority themes within VLIR-UOS FYP2 (2022 – 2026) • Maternity and paternity/co-parent guidelines for VLIR-UOS scholars
Related VLIRUOS procedures	• VLIR-UOS selection system Version of 3 October 2023, based on decisions of the Bureau UOS of 19/11/2021, 21/01/2022, 25/03/2022, 18/11/2022, 31/03/2023, 15/09/2023 and 28 June 2024 • Selection procedure ICP scholars (2025-2026)
Previous versions of this policy	• Leaving No One Behind Leaving - Equality & Inclusion Policy of VLIRUOS: Part 1: Gender Policy 2020-2024 (Versie 2.0, approved by the Bureau UOS on 03/07/2020)

6.1. Annex(es):

A. Context and key concepts in the gender policy (see Leaving No One Behind Leaving - Equality & Inclusion Policy of VLIRUOS: Part 1: Gender Policy 2020-2024 (Versie 2.0, approved by the Bureau UOS on 03/07/2020)
B. Flash card gender (2017)
C. Engagements for the Bureau UOS of 23/04/2020
D. Call for experts for VLIRUOS selection commissions