GENDER EQUALITY PLAN

2022-2024

LAW AND INTERNET FOUNDATION

RESEARCH CENTER FOR LAW AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

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INTRODUCTION

Law and Internet Foundation(LIF) is a Bulgarian NGO & Research center which supports and performs applied studies, scientific research, programmes and projects, provides consultancy and delivers trainings in the field of legal, technological, and social issues related to the use of information and communication technologies both in the public and private sectors.[1] One of the main goals of LIF is providing accessible activities to people no matter their gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, cultural and religious background.

In order to ensure that the research LIF performs is of the highest quality, the team behind our organisation is open, well-adjusted and consists of representatives of all groups of society. Thus, since our creation, we have emphasised on creating an open, friendly and inclusive environment. We have sought to include as many representatives of different gender and other minorities, to intertwine their voices and experience into our research and practices, as well as to structure our behavior in a way that would allow us to gather as much objective and detailed information on the topics we discuss.

Our Gender Equality Plan (GEP) has helped us structure our approach towards being more gender inclusive. It has furthermore made it possible to focus on introducing an intersectional lens to any issue we work on. Having a thorough GEP has allowed us to pinpoint weaknesses in our internal processes and address them accordingly.

While creating this GEP, we have consulted our partners, looked over the practices of other experienced organisations and relied on the recommendations and guidance set by the European Institute on Gender Equality.[2] When identifying the objectives and measures we decided to base our GEP on, we looked over several considerations:[3]

- **Location** – being located in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe, we considered the cultural prejudice and stereotypes relevant to our region that could influence the access of women to research opportunities, as well as common work-based hardships individuals face based on their gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other marginalised identities.
- **Economical background** – we considered the relevant economic background and how it would influence gender-inclusion policies, for example whether unpaid internships would dissuade economically marginalised groups from applying, whether our family leave policies influence employment and family decisions of our staff, etc.

[1]More at: https://www.netlaw.bg/en/p/about-us, last accessed: 11 April 2022
[2]EIGE, 'Gender Equality in Academia and Research - GEAR tool', available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear, last accessed: 12 April 2022
[3]EIGE, 'Gear Step-By-Step Guide For Research Organisations, Universities And Public Bodies - Step 1: Getting started', available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/step-step-guide/step-1, last accessed: 12 April 2022

- **Policies** – we considered the relevant EU-wide, national, sectoral and organisational policies that were already in place and influenced the *status quo* of our organisation.
- **History** – we analysed the historical development of our organisation and how this may influence or even limit our understanding and openness to change in accordance with the goal of achieving a more inclusive and diverse environment.
- **Leadership and governance** – we recognised the strong influence our organisation's approach to leadership and internal structure could have on the work atmosphere and openness to diversity, our organisation works on a non-hierarchical basis and this helps us achieve a friendly and accepting atmosphere among workers and cultivates more trust towards our founders and executive director, which in turn creates accountability and reliance.
- **Organisational culture** - we analysed our organisational culture in order to ensure we would be aware if there were any policies or measures that could cause resistance and how to present these changes to our workers in a way that would be understood and well-accepted.
- **Size** – we considered how the size of our organisation would influence its structure and the affect different measures, as well as how realistic their implementation would be, we found that our close-knit team would be well accepting of most proposed policies and thus the processes we adopted were to a large extent effective.

STATUS QUO ASSESSMENT

A vital part in having an effective GEP is conducting beforehand a detailed assessment of the status quo at the time of creation of the plan. This assessment was conducted by our Human Rights Department and our Strategic Development Department, who used their past experiences and knowledge in the field of gender equality and anti-discrimination policies. Their mandate and tasks were clearly defined by our managerial bodies in a way that would avoid any misconceptions and potential challenges during their work.

Our assessment focused on some key considerations:

- Applicable EU policies and recommendations;
- Applicable national policies and recommendations;
- Current practices of our organisation;
- Additionally, we collected and analysed sex-disaggregated data about staff and researchers in our organisation.

We focused on some key indicators for potential disruptions in gender equality: number of staff based on gender, potential wage gaps, number of job candidates based on gender, absence days based on gender, progression in our organisation, etc.

AREA OF DEVELOPMENT 1: Work–life balance and organisational culture

Our organisation's main activities include research and working on various projects that aim to analyse and promote a large range of topics connected to the legal and ethical aspects of information and communicatin technologies. This line of work based while extremely important, allows for a flexible working culture that prioritises the health and well-being of our experts. We create an open environment focused on self-development, better results and a good balance between work and personal life. Some of our **key principles** include:

- Open communication;
- Understanding each other's differences;
- Flexibility;
- Responsible work ethic;
- Prioritising mental health;
- Loyalty to our partners and our teammates.

These principles have helped us to establish a healthy working environment where professionals can grow and develop. However, there are still some objectives that we would like to work on in order to ensure our experts are content and satisfied. In addition, we have mitigated potential hardship that might be faced by any members of minority groups that work with us or would do so in the future.

These **objectives** are as follows:

- Providing the best system for parental leave for our team members;
- Providing enough support for the mental and physical well-being of our team members;
- Emphasising the importance of healthy living;
- Creating a work environment where experts do not suffer from unwarranted stress.

To achieve these objectives, we have established a number of measures we would like to apply:

- A clear system that would provide team members with clarity how they can take days-off and that would allow us to accommodate this effectively;
- Providing the experts with the ability to work from home;
- Organising team-buildings that would aim to reduce stress and create a friendly work environment;
- Making lunches a team activity where people can cool off from stress and socialise with each other;
- Turning our office space into an inviting environment – having pictures of our team, decorating it for different celebrations, encouraging team members to bring

home-cooked treats to facilitate a feeling of homeliness, listening to songs together near the end of the workday to take tension off, etc.;

- Celebrating when our experts become parents and giving them enough time and resources instead of making them anxious whether this would influence their work security, special focus can be given to women who are often dissuading from starting a family as they are afraid how this would influence their career or on young fathers who could also be unsure whether their need to be with their children would be respected due to their gender and cultural prejudice;
- Discuss openly the mental challenges work can cause and prioritise the importance of mental well-being and a balanced lifestyle;
- Providing multisport cards to facilitate the psychical activity of our team members that would help their overall wellbeing;
- Respecting the particular needs of representatives of cultural, ethnical and religious minorities: special holidays during minority religion festivals, accommodating specific dietary practices, being flexible in relation to providing days-off for family gatherings for individuals with strong familiar ties based on their culture.

The **indicators** we would focus on would be: the feeling of satisfaction from our team members – right now around 75% feel at ease at their workplace and 70% believe they have a good life/work balance. **Our target** is to have both indicators go **above 85%** by the end of the time period of this plan.

The **responsibility** to overlook these processes lies on our managerial bodies and on our office manager. They will initiate the implementation of the applicable measures.

AREA OF DEVELOPMENT 2: Gender balance in leadership and decision-making

Our organisation **has women in leadership positions**, and this helps guarantee the decision-making process takes into consideration the marginalisation of women in the workforce and helps us adopt measures to ensure our female team members feel included and supported. However, we would still focus on some **key objectives**:

- Ensuring the decision-making process is considerate of the hardships women face in the workforce;
- Ensure that the decision-making process is through an intersectional lens that acknowledges that individuals often fall under a multitude of identities that may influence how they are perceive and what opportunities they are given;
- Ensure individuals feel safe and respected to raise any concerns they have to our executive leader;

The **measures** we would implement include:

- Consulting our experts, especially those of underrepresented voices, in order to ensure all views and interests have been considered before substantial decisions are made;
- Create channels and mechanisms where individuals can anonymously submit their complaints;
- Have socialising events between our team members and the heads of our organisation to ensure there is familiarity and individuals do not feel intimidated to address their supervisors.

The **indicator** whether this is effective would again be based on the satisfaction of the team members. Right now, 70% feel they can freely raise concerns with their direct supervisor, we would like to raise that percentage to **over 80% after the end of the time period of this plan.** We would also like to see a more intersectional approach when addressing different difficulties our organisation faces, our indicator here would be whether we **reference the influence of our policies on underrepresented groups during the decision-making process**.

The **responsibility** to overlook these processes would lie mainly on our managerial bodies and executive director.

AREA OF DEVELOPMENT 3: Gender equality in recruitment and career progression

Currently, we have achieved relatively equal representation between men and women in our team. We believe we have created an efficient recruitment mechanism that allows us to help people, without prejudice to their gender, to show their strength during our selection process and start working our organisation. Furthermore, individuals are later equally supported in their career progression in our structure. Still to protect this balance and to ensure individuals from underrepresented backgrounds also have equal opportunities we have focus on a number of **objectives**:

- Incentivise women, especially those from ethnical, religious, sexual and other minorities to apply for vacant positions in our organisation;
- Ensure our recruitment process does not discriminate directly or in-directly;
- Provide enough career progression opportunities for representatives of minorities in our structures;

To achieve this, we have focus on the following **measures**:

- Formulating our job offers in a way that does not subconsciously dissuade women or other underrepresented groups from applying;
- Ensuring our recruiters are aware of any implicit biases they may have;
- Ensuring our executives, recruiters, experts and others to have had sensitivity trainings on topics, such as religious tolerance, gender and sexual rights, etc.;
- Creating an excepting environment for minority representatives so they feel supported at work and can perform to their best capacity: allowing them to wear cultural and religious symbols at work, providing an open environment where they can share their culture and experiences, etc.

The **indicator**s we will rely on are the following:

- At least **50%** of job applications are from women and that there is a diversity in their background by the end of the time period of this plan;
- Ensuring our women and other minority representatives feel content with their position in our organisation – right now, all of our surveyed representatives are satisfied, we would strive to keep this number **over 90%;**
- Ensuring our women and other minority representatives feel accepted at work – right now, all of our surveyed representatives are satisfied, we would strive to keep this number **over 90%;**
- Having **at least one cultural event** per year where individuals can share their particular cultural, religious, etc. identity freely;
- Having **at least one sensitivity training** per year on different anti-discrimination topics;
- The **responsibility** to overlook this would lie on our managerial bodies, office manager and requitement officers.

AREA OF DEVELOPMENT 4: Integration of the gender dimension into our research and other activities

In order to ensure our research is objective and thorough we seek to include as many voices as possible during our research and other activities. The fact that our team consist of representatives of gender helps us ensure we have a comprehensive approach towards our topics of research. Furthermore, we always seek to work with partners and external experts that would be able to give us valuable insights and to moderate our work processes to ensure we have an intersectional approach and responsibly handle all elements of our work process. Still, we have pin-pointed the following **objectives** we seek to pursue:

- Including as many voices as possible and ensuring that on specific topics that influence gender and other minorities there are key representatives of said groups;
- Ensuring our researchers recognise potential biases they may have when conduct research and other activities;
- Ensuring our findings are comprehensive and objective.

The **measures** we would implement include:

- Providing sensitivity trainings for researchers that are taking part in discussions on sensitive topics;
- Seeking guidance from renowned minority voices in research fields when we address topics relevant to them;
- Ensuring we have a third-party that will overlook our work and findings in order to ensure it is objective and comprehensive;
- Giving back to minorities who have supported us during our work – promoting their voices and interests, acknowledging their contribution, providing them free trainings and including them in our events.

The **indicators** for this would include high levels of satisfaction among our extnernal experts and high rating among our third-party editors. We aim to reach above **80% good reviews for both parameters**. Furthermore, we would strive to have **one sensitivity training** for each minority-centred topic we have decided to base our research on. We would also like to have **at least one topic of research** per year that in some way addresses the **influence of technologies on the well-being and integration of different marginalised groups in society**.

The **responsibility** to overlook this would lie mainly on our research team and the coordinators of our projects.

AREA OF DEVELOPMENT 5: Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment

Our team has worked on topics concerning sexual harassment and gender-based abuse, thus it is well versed in these topics and to a large extent this has helped us preserve a safe and supporting work environment. Still, we have found **key objectives** we would like to pursue:

- Ensuring our team members are aware of sensitive topics concerning gender-based violence and sexual harassment;
- Ensuring our understanding of gender-based issues is also from an intersectional perspective and that we acknowledge how racial, religious and other prejudice can influence these issues;
- Ensuring our experts are able to freely report any incidents they have experienced or witnesses;
- Providing adequate measures against offenders and creating a 'victim-centric' system for dealing with instances of abuse and harassment;
- With account to the prevalent biases in Bulgaria towards men victims of sexual abuse, we would emphasise that individuals without prejudice to their gender can be victims of sexual abuse and sexual harassment.

The **measures** we envision include:

- Creating an anonymous system for reporting;
- Creating clear codes of conduct that envision the obligations of our experts towards one another and the applicable penalties for any instances of harassment or abuse;
- Conducting trainings on topics such as how to stop sexual harassment at the workplace, differences in cultural understanding between team members that may lead to risks of microaggressions or unwanted sexual advances, etc.

The **indicators** here would include level of satisfaction among our experts. Right now, all team members of our organisation feel safe at the workplace, we would strive to always retain this level to 100%. We would furthermore want to have **at least one sensitivity training** on the designated topics per year. Moreover, we would want to have at least one covert **test of the anonymous reporting system** to see whether it works accordingly and how it can be improved if we find any difficulties. Lastly, we would have **at least one yearly meeting** to see how aware our experts are of our code of conduct, here we would like to find that **at least 70%** of them can account for the main points under this code. During this meeting team members would also be able to share their **insights** on the overall culture of our organisation and how we can better address these issues.

The **responsibility** to overlook this would lie mainly on executive and managerial bodies, as well as in particular on our office manager.

AREA OF DEVELOPMENT 6: Gender balance of audiences

An important aspect of our work is its role in sharing information and reaching relevant audiences. Many of the topics we address and activities we organise aim to raise social awareness or to inspire legislative change or for enacting better policies and practices. Thus, a key number of our activities include creating dissemination materials, organising trainings and events, etc. We aim to have a wide audience that consists of all groups of society.

To achieve this, we have focused on **two key objectives**:

- Reaching as many people as possible on a multitude of social media platforms and where appropriate through traditional media;
- Making our content and events as accessible as possible for diverse audiences no matter their professional background, level of education and other similar characteristics.

The **measures** we have envisioned are as follows:

- Using accessible language for the informative materials we create;
- Where the topic calls for professional language and difficult terminology, using clarifications and disclaimers in order to guide the reader in case they may become lost in the messaging;
- Tackling diverse topics and issues to ensure we are able to reach interested groups from different fields;
- Analysing whether certain language or style of writing will dissuade certain reader groups from engaging with our materials, for example whether certain STEM terminology may intimidate female audiences, due to the systemic barriers that have made it difficult for them to enter these fields or for example how to tailor some of our topics concerning sexual abuse online towards male audiences without prejudice to them and their experience;
- Using all appropriate channels to promote events or topics in order to reach wide audiences;
- Using past contacts in order to reach new target groups;
- Trying to foster and preserve existing target groups that have worked with us and are interested in our topics and activities – sending them informative content if they have consented to such updates, inviting them to follow events, etc.;
- Analysing the demography, we have managed to reach, and seeing if we should work to include underrepresented groups;
- Asking for feedback after events in order to gain insights how to better our communication approach;
- Contacting any advocacy groups for different minorities to help us promote events and to share materials if the topics concern those groups or as a whole or if their engagement would help us have a more comprehensive understanding of the

issues, such groups could include for example women or men from ethnical minorities, men victims of sexual abuse, women or men with disabilities, etc.

The **indicators** we would focus on would be the statistical outlook of the audiences of such events. We should aim to have **equality among female and male audiences**, with at **least 15%** of audiences being from targeted groups based on the topic we discuss (advocacy groups for sexual abuse for sexual abuse topics, family law lawyers for family law topics, etc.).

The **responsibility** to overlook this would lie mainly on our research team and the coordinators of our projects.

EVALUATION

To ensure this GEP is being effectively applied we will introduce **annual evaluations** during the period of this plan. These will be conducted by our office manager, with the help of our Strategic Development Department. If LIF Executive Director decides that it is needed, the organisation can seek further assistance from external experts on gender-based research and the way it can be further improved.

In order for this plan to be considered efficiently applied, after the first year the requirements under all objectives and indicators must be satisfied at **minimum 40%**. After the second year, they must be accomplished **at 100%**, however if this is not the case, we would aim for them to be reach **80%**, with the remaining requirements having to be effectively worked on and fulfilled **in the following 3 months** after the end of the second year.

After each evaluation, the team that conducted it must create and disclose a **report** on shortcomings and developments. They must furthermore elaborate on **what measures must be taken in addition** to those already pursued to ensure the plan is effectively applied. These findings must be presented to the managerial bodies and the Executive Director.

ANNEX 1: Example questions to be used during evaluation

Preliminary remark: These are only points of reference, the evaluating team have full discretion how to conduct their analysis, the only form of supervision could come from the executive director of LIF.

ANONYMOUS QUESTIONNAIRE

Remark 1: *We* ***strongly advice*** *that this questionnaire is distributed to* ***all team members*** *no matter their position and is to be filled at their discretion trough an* ***anonymous online*** *form.*

Remark 2*: We* ***strongly advice*** *that the team conduction the evaluation emphasises that the answers under this questionnaire* ***would not be traced to the individual*** *that submitted them and* ***would not be able to influence them****.*

Remark 3: *We* ***strongly advice*** *that if this questionnaire is to be modified, the evaluation team should continue to prioritise using* ***neutral and inclusive language*** *and should avoid including points that may strengthen unconscious biases.*

1. *Do you feel stressed at work?*
2. *How would you describe the work environment in the office of your organisation?*
3. *Are your needs for leisure and days-off well respected?*
4. *Are you given enough flexibility and opportunities for remote work?*
5. *Is your office and supervisor understanding of your needs in relation to your cultural, religious, gender, sexual, etc. identity?*
6. *Do you feel your work is in conflict with your family life?*
7. *Would you say that men and women are given equally challenges tasks in your organisation? If not, why so?*
8. *Are there women in leadership positions in your organisation? Do they have the same authority as men in similar roles? If not, why so?*
9. *Do you feel satisfied with your current role?*
10. *Do you believe you are given enough opportunities to grow in the ranks of your organisation?*
11. *Do you feel that women are given enough opportunities for additional work and skill-related trainings?*
12. *Did you feel comfortable with the selection process when you applied for your position?*
13. *Do you believe your organisation provides enough sensitivity trainings?*
14. *Do you feel comfortable expressing your gender, sexual, ethnical, religious, cultural or other identity at your workplace? Do you feel comfortable expressing it in front of your supervisors?*
15. *Do you feel the topics you research address important societal questions? Does our research consider the influence of these topics on gender and other identity-based minorities?*
16. *Do you gain enough insights from representatives of minority groups when you address topics linked to said groups?*
17. *Have you witnessed sexual harassment at your workplace?*
18. *Have you been a victim of sexual harassment at your workplace? Have you suffered from other forms of prejudice and/or microaggressions?*
19. *Do you feel comfortable filling complaints for harassment and abuse at the workplace? If not, why so?*
20. *What would you change in order to ensure gender and other identity-based minorities are supported at your workplace?*

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