

GENDER EQUALITY PLAN 2025

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Promoting equal opportunities at the German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (DZNE)

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1. Introduction

As one of the leading research centers in the field of neurodegenerative diseases, the German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (DZNE) is committed to excellence in science in an equitable and supportive working environment. This Gender Equality Plan (GEP) underscores the DZNE's clear commitment to promoting equality. The aim is to break down systematic barriers, ensure equal opportunities for all genders, and strengthen a culture of appreciation and fair participation.

Where applicable, the DZNE bases its work on the German Sustainability Strategy (DNS), which is based on the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. SDG 5 ("Gender equality and self-determination for all women and girls") is particularly important for the Gender Equality Plan. The 2025 version of the DNS emphasizes the need for structural equality measures as well as the importance of equal opportunities in personnel and organizational development. In addition, the DZNE takes into account the principles of the Public Corporate Governance Code (PCGK), particularly with regard to equality, diversity, transparency, and the compatibility of work, care, and private life. These overarching standards support the goal of strategically and structurally anchoring equality in the organization.

The DZNE's Gender Equality Plan primarily addresses equality between women and men. In the long term, it aims to help create the fundamental conditions for all employees to have the same opportunities to reach their full potential. The overarching goals of the Gender Equality Plan are:

- To reduce the underrepresentation of women and men in all areas, especially in management positions
- Targeted recruitment of young talent
- Improving the compatibility of work and family life

To achieve these goals, the DZNE promotes appropriate conditions and measures that enable gender-equitable development. An inclusive and respectful approach to one another is part of the corporate culture. Aspects of diversity and different life realities are taken into account in the spirit of a holistic understanding of equality.

The DZNE considers the achievement of gender equality and the promotion of family-friendliness and work-life balance to be strategic goals and important management tasks. The aim is to promote the potential of all employees in the best possible way in order to better understand the causes of neurodegenerative diseases and develop new therapeutic approaches. Different experiences and perspectives make a significant contribution to scientific excellence and sustainable innovation.

Respectful and appreciative cooperation forms the basis of our collaboration. The DZNE stands for a working environment in which all employees—regardless of individual characteristics—can feel included and recognized. Features of our work culture include interdisciplinary cooperation, a mixed-age workforce, internationality, and measures to improve the compatibility of work and private life.

The Gender Equality Plan sets out binding targets for a period of four years. It will be reviewed and, if necessary, adjusted after two years. Once it expires, the plan will be comprehensively updated. It applies to all DZNE employees.

2. Status quo of gender equality work at the DZNE

Gender equality is an essential task and mission at the German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases. It is an integral part of strategic personnel and organizational development and is understood as a central prerequisite for scientific performance, institutional excellence, and sustainable innovation.

Since its foundation, the DZNE has pursued a systematic and long-term gender equality policy with the aim of specifically promoting women at all qualification and career levels. A clear commitment to this goal was made in 2019 with the signing of a voluntary commitment to promote equal opportunities at the DZNE. Analysis of the gender distribution in various areas shows that significant progress has already been made, but at the same time, there is still a need for action at individual career levels in order to consistently establish a gender-equitable personnel structure.

These measures have led to a stable high proportion of women, currently around 60% of the total workforce. Despite these positive developments, structural challenges remain in individual areas. In particular, a balanced gender distribution has not yet been fully achieved in higher pay grades and in specialized fields. As of December 31, 2024, the DZNE employed a total of 1,226 people in pay grades EG 1 to EG 15 (excluding temporary staff, trainees, working students, and employees on W-salary scales).

In order to institutionalize its equality goals, the DZNE signed a voluntary commitment to promote equal opportunities in 2019. In the same year, it also signed the Diversity Charter (Charta der Vielfalt). With both initiatives, the DZNE is expressly committed to a non-discriminatory, appreciative, and equal opportunity organizational culture that recognizes diversity as a strength and actively promotes it.

2.1 Gender distribution in science and scientific leadership positions

The proportion of women varies considerably within the scientific areas of the DZNE. In order to specifically promote equal opportunities at all scientific career levels, the Joint Science Conference introduced the cascade model in 2011 as a central control instrument for non-university research institutions as well. The basic idea behind this model is to align the proportion of women at one qualification level with that at the level immediately below it, taking into account the positions that are likely to become vacant. The aim is to increase the proportion of women in scientific leadership positions and in higher scientific salary groups in the long term and to achieve equal representation. The targets are set on the basis of analyses of potential vacancies, new positions to be filled, financial planning, and regular staff turnover.

As of December 31, 2024, the proportion of women in the scientific field at the DZNE will be 51% overall. Significant progress has been made in several areas: for example, the proportion of women in the W2 remuneration group rose from less than 20% in 2019 to 35% in 2024. In the science-related pay groups EG 15 and EG 13, the proportion of women is also above 50% at 54.3% and 57.9% respectively, which represents a balanced staffing level.

In a few areas, however, structural barriers continue to exist that make it difficult to achieve gender equality in staffing. Despite intensive measures, parity quotas have not yet been achieved in these areas. However, developments in recent years show a positive trend toward steady improvement in gender equality at the DZNE.

Numerous targeted measures have been implemented to support this development. These include special support programs for female scientists, structured mentoring and career development opportunities, flexible working hours and part-time models, as well as training and further education courses to raise awareness among managers. The effectiveness of these measures is continuously reviewed and further developed as necessary. The target quotas set for December 31, 2025, as part of the cascade model have already been achieved or exceeded in all relevant areas. The Helmholtz Association's cascade model aims to systematically increase the proportion of women in leadership positions. The target quotas at each career level are based on the proportion of qualified women at the level below.

The DZNE thus reaffirms its long-term commitment to equal opportunities, diversity, and a sustainably anchored equality policy.

2.2 Gender distribution in administrative positions at the DZNE

The gender distribution in administration and other non-scientific management positions at the DZNE also shows an overall balanced representation at the management level. The proportion of women at the center management level is 50%, which reflects equal representation at the top management level.

In general, women are particularly well represented in the administrative area: in the higher pay grades EG15 and EG13, the proportion of women is 63% and 60%. In addition, the majority of site coordinators who manage the administration at the DZNE sites are women; at 78%, seven of the nine sites (excluding Bonn) are managed by female executives. These figures illustrate the central role of women in senior administrative and organizational functions at the DZNE.

Overall, the proportion of women in management positions at the DZNE in science and administration is well over 45% (W2 and W3 salaries, department/staff unit/junior research group leaders).

3. Structural embedding of gender equality work

At the DZNE, the Equal Opportunities Officer and her deputy are elected for a term of four years. Their central task is to promote gender equality and equal opportunities for women and men. In addition, they provide advice and support to all employees. In close cooperation with the Human Resources department, which represents the employer, the equal opportunities officers are involved in the development and implementation of measures to promote equality. They also contribute their expertise to projects related to equal opportunities and diversity, thereby contributing to the further development of an equal and respectful working environment at the DZNE.

Furthermore, the DZNE is represented in the Helmholtz Working Group of Equal Opportunities Officers. The working group comprises the equal opportunities officers and their deputies from the research centers of the Helmholtz Association. It serves to address cross-center equality issues, facilitate professional exchange and effective cooperation with the Helmholtz Office, and promote joint action within the *Alliance of Equal Opportunities Officers of Non-University Research Organizations (AGBaF)*.

Furthermore, the DZNE's management and equal opportunities officer report annually to its supervisory board on developments in the area of equal opportunities.

4. Measures for equal opportunities and work-life balance

Increasing the proportion of women in a department is the responsibility of the respective manager. It is the DZNE's task to provide optimal conditions for this and to support this endeavor with the necessary measures.

- The DZNE promotes the participation of women in committees. For example, selection committees formed as part of the application process should have equal representation of both genders. If this is not possible in individual cases for valid reasons, these reasons must be documented.
- In accordance with the provisions of the General Equal Treatment Act (AGG), the DZNE contributes to preventing discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. The DZNE informs its employees that violations will result in consequences under labor law. In such cases, the DZNE may issue transfers, warnings, and dismissals, among other measures. In addition, there is a central complaints office at the DZNE to which all employees can turn if they feel discriminated against on the basis of gender. The document "Working Environment and Mutual Interaction at the DZNE" also sets out rules of conduct that are intended to provide guidance to everyone at the DZNE. This paper was actively co-authored by the equal opportunities officers and approved by the DZNE Executive Board. This has established rules of conduct at the DZNE that are intended to create a trusting and safe working environment for all employees and to provide guidance to each individual on how to contribute to this goal.
- The DZNE takes care to include both genders as evenly as possible in its research projects. However, the scientific mission always takes priority. In certain cases—for example, if a project is specifically aimed at a particular gender or if only a very small number of participants are expected—it is not always possible to achieve equal representation.
- All documents and forms at the DZNE are written in gender-sensitive language.

Overview of measures

4.1 Services for families

The DZNE actively supports the compatibility of work and family life and provides a wide range of services to this end. In cooperation with an external family service, the DZNE offers individual advice and support in all matters relating to childcare and care for family members. Emergency care is available for short-term needs. In addition, the DZNE reimburses childcare costs incurred during business trips to give employees the greatest possible flexibility. Through a cooperation with the daycare center of the University Hospital Bonn, the DZNE also creates additional childcare places for employees at the same location. In addition, return-to-work interviews after parental leave promote a targeted and needs-oriented return to work.

4.2 Flexible working time models and mobile working

The DZNE promotes a modern work culture based on trust, personal responsibility, and the individual life situations of its employees. To support the compatibility of work and private life, a variety of flexible working models are available, including mobile working, flexitime, part-time work,

and job sharing. A specially equipped flex room at the Bonn and Tübingen locations also offers retreats for breastfeeding, short-term childcare at the workplace, use by people with disabilities, or religious practice.

An important part of this flexible work culture is the company agreement on mobile working, which was first introduced at the Bonn location in 2020. It has since been adopted at the Munich, Ulm, Dresden, Göttingen, and Witten locations as well. At locations without a works council, a corresponding guideline on flexible working has been implemented in line with the works agreement. The regulation enables employees to organize their working hours and place of work flexibly, which contributes significantly to the DZNE's attractiveness as an employer. In the long term, there are plans to introduce this regulation at all DZNE locations.

4.3 Services for employees who are caregivers

The DZNE recognizes the particular challenge of balancing professional demands with caring for relatives. Various services are available to provide employees in this situation with the best possible support. These include flexible leave options in the context of caregiving and reimbursement of care costs incurred during business trips. In addition, company care guides provide guidance on support services, legal regulations, and internal procedures. This offering is supplemented by cooperation with an external family service that provides individual advice and practical assistance with caregiving issues.

4.4 Recruitment and hiring

Job vacancies are advertised internally and externally in a gender-neutral manner. The wording of job advertisements is gender- and diversity-sensitive, so that all people feel equally encouraged to apply for the advertised position. In addition, both the equal opportunities representative and the representative for people with disabilities have equal access to the job advertisements.

In 2024, the DZNE successfully obtained funding from the Helmholtz Association for diversity-sensitive recruitment. As part of the project, various measures are to be developed, such as a target group-specific employer marketing campaign with the associated development of diversity-sensitive text and imagery in personnel marketing measures. The focus is on people with severe disabilities in science, people under 30 in administration, and women in IT. The aim is to create greater diversity in these areas and achieve a multiplier effect through role models. The challenge here is to consider general personnel requirements and the focus on underrepresented groups equally. In addition, the project aims to make the recruitment process more objective and equitable by increasing diversity competence. The decentralized implementation of the recruitment process is particularly challenging here, as the HR department can only put central guidelines into practice through acceptance and awareness-raising.

4.5 Childcare

The DZNE provides comprehensive support to parents in all childcare situations as needed. This includes, in particular, parents who are unable to obtain a place in a daycare center—for example, for children under the age of three or for those who start work after the registration deadline—as

well as those who need to compensate for short-term childcare absences. To provide support, the DZNE offers appropriate services and contributes to the financing of external services. A commissioned external provider offers counseling services and arranges suitable childcare options, including holiday care, and operates its own facility for emergency childcare.

At the Bonn site, a contingent of childcare places is also provided through a cooperation with the daycare center of the University Hospital Bonn. As already reported in section 4.2, two sites also have parent-child rooms and flex rooms available to further facilitate the compatibility of family and career.

4.6 Reimbursement of childcare costs

In addition, a procedure has been introduced for the reimbursement of childcare costs for children and relatives in need of care in the context of business trips, official visits, and training courses. Under this procedure, either hourly childcare costs or travel expenses incurred by the caregiver can be reimbursed up to a specified annual maximum amount, subject to certain conditions. The relevant information and application forms are available to employees on the intranet.

4.7 Life-stage-oriented measures and employee support

Employees often face professional and personal challenges that require professional advice and support to resolve. These challenges may include caring for parents, health problems, or particularly stressful periods in their professional or personal lives. Since 2020, the DZNE has therefore been working in partnership with an external family service. Employees can obtain free, quick, and anonymous help and support on a wide range of topics and areas at , such as advice on parental allowance/parental leave or care allowance. In addition to childcare and home care/elder care, health measures and life coaching are also offered. Support and advice is also available for managers on the topics of communication, conflicts, and time and self-management. The external family service also offers a comprehensive online information and event portal on all topics, including online lectures and events, a digital running or stress coach, short videos with bite-sized pieces of information, a form service, and free online yoga.

4.8 Dual Career Network

Scientists face enormous demands on their flexibility and mobility in the course of their careers. At the same time, the number of "dual career couples," i.e., couples in which both partners pursue their own professional careers, is steadily increasing. A change of location for professional reasons increasingly depends on whether there are also attractive career prospects for the partner at the new place of residence.

The DZNE is a member of the Rhineland Dual Career Network, which supports partners of scientists in their search for career prospects in the Rhineland. The universities and research institutions affiliated with the Dual Career Network Rhineland share the common goal of attracting excellent scientists to the Rhineland region and not only offering them outstanding career opportunities, but also enabling dual-career couples to achieve a healthy work-life balance. To achieve this, the Dual Career Service provides targeted support to newly appointed or outstanding

scientists in their own professional development and to their partners in starting a new career in the Rhineland. The Dual Career Network Rhineland can highlight additional alternatives that match individual qualification profiles. Even if a suitable position cannot be guaranteed, scientists benefit from the close cooperation between network members, thereby increasing their chances of success.

4.9 Junior Research Groups

The Helmholtz Junior Research Groups program gives postdocs the opportunity to receive funding for five years (with the option of extending to seven years if the interim evaluation is positive) to take on their first group leadership role. This leadership role brings with it early scientific independence and high visibility in the community. Applications from women are supported, among other things, by actively approaching potential candidates. After a positive evaluation, the position can be made permanent, which offers long-term planning security and thus facilitates the compatibility of work and family life and promotes equal opportunities.

In addition, the DZNE offers the *Career Development Fellow (CDF)* program as an internal career path. This program offers outstanding postdocs the opportunity to lead their own research group for a period of five years, which they finance through external third-party funding. The aim of this program is to promote the transition to an independent scientific career and to enable entry into an academic leadership position outside the DZNE. Independence, visibility, and planning security are equally guaranteed. In exceptional cases, particularly successful fellows may also be offered a permanent position at the DZNE after the funding phase has ended. In recent years, this career path in particular has enabled the DZNE to retain female managers beyond the traditional junior staff programs.

4.10 Increasing gender competence among employees and managers

The sensitivity of the workforce and management to the issue of gender equality is to be systematically increased through a diverse and continuous range of internal events. In particular, the specific challenges faced by women in science have been intensively addressed in the past in order to raise awareness of existing inequalities and promote constructive solutions. These include regular lectures and discussion events that address key topics such as *the glass ceiling in science*, *equal pay*, and *unconscious bias*. These formats provide space for open exchange, promote understanding of unconscious biases, and motivate active engagement with gender equality issues.

These events are organized and conducted in close cooperation between Human Resources Development and the Equal Opportunities Officers, who often act as co-hosts. With their expertise and commitment, they play a key role in tailoring the events to the target audience and ensuring their long-term success. In addition, the aim is to introduce further formats such as workshops, interactive training courses, and role model initiatives in order to cover different learning and communication needs and increase the effectiveness of awareness-raising measures. The goal is to promote a culture of openness, appreciation, and equality within the DZNE that goes beyond the mere transfer of knowledge and supports concrete changes in everyday work.

4.11 Career Center offerings and development of early-career scientists

A key instrument for the structured promotion of young scientists at the DZNE is the Career Center, which was founded in 2020. It supports young scientists through targeted training opportunities, individual counseling, and digital learning and information formats. The Career Center sees itself as a central point of contact for career orientation and development within and outside of academic careers.

Specific services have been implemented within the Career Center to promote equality in science and research. These include workshops on *female leadership*, *unconscious bias*, and formats for balancing family and scientific careers. In the context of public event series—such as panel discussions or the so-called *Career Talks*, in which job holders present their professional careers—attention is paid to balanced gender representation. The aim is to make equal opportunities visible, promote awareness, and, in particular, make female role models recognizable and accessible. These formats exemplify individual solutions in the area of conflict between career and work-life balance.

Since 2021, a total of 13 *Career Talks* have been held, 11 of which featured female role models. This clear overrepresentation of female perspectives illustrates the high level of commitment to making women in science more visible, but at the same time shows the need to pay even more conscious attention to balanced representation of all genders in the future.

In addition, the *Women in Science* event series was continued in 2025. The series makes an important contribution to the long-term visibility and discussion of gender equality issues in a scientific context. It addresses the question of how women in science can be specifically promoted and how structural barriers to leadership positions can be removed. Interactive formats such as panel discussions and workshops address topics such as mentoring, unconscious bias, and building supportive networks.

Another key support tool is the internal development program *Excellence in Science*, which is aimed at postdocs who aspire to an academic leadership role, such as a professorship. The program offers participants structured development opportunities as well as access to mentoring, exchange formats, and individual career counseling. Here, too, attention is paid to achieving a balanced gender distribution among participants, mentors, and other involved persons. In the two cohorts to date, the proportion of female participants was 58% (cohort 1) and 60% (cohort 2).

4.12 Memberships in networks

Since 2024, the DZNE has been a member of the "Erfolgsfaktor Familie" (Success Factor Family) network. This network, with over 9,000 members, offers a wide range of opportunities for networking and knowledge exchange on the topic of work-life balance. Members also benefit from a wealth of best practice examples and extensive information material.

The DZNE has been part of the North Rhine-Westphalia state program "Vereinbarkeit von Beruf und Pflege" (Work-Life Balance) since 2022. As part of this program, two company care guides

have been trained to serve as the first point of contact for all employees with questions about balancing work and caregiving, such as options for leave in acute care situations. In addition, members of the state program benefit from regular exchange formats and online lectures on relevant care topics.

Within the Helmholtz Association, the DZNE is also actively involved in exchanges on the compatibility of work and family life. In addition to the exchange of knowledge, the focus here is on the joint organization of events on topics such as "mental load" or "living wills."

Another significant milestone was reached in 2025 when the DZNE was awarded the TOTAL EQUALITY rating. This rating recognizes the organization's special commitment to equal opportunities and diversity in the workplace. The award confirms the DZNE's sustained commitment to a family-friendly, fair, and non-discriminatory organizational culture—an important step toward greater equality and diversity in the research environment.

5. Outlook

The German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases (DZNE) remains committed to promoting equality and equal opportunities and embedding these values firmly in its organizational culture. Equal opportunities are understood in a comprehensive sense, recognizing and taking into account different life realities and diversity. In addition to equality, various dimensions of diversity and their interactions also play an important role.

To achieve these goals, the DZNE plans to further strengthen awareness of equal opportunities and diversity—especially among managers—through information events and the targeted use of role models. In addition, additional memberships in Germany-wide and regional networks are planned to further promote professional exchange and sustainably improve the framework conditions for employees and their families.

The DZNE is committed to continuing along this path and promoting an open, fair, and diverse research and working environment through evaluation and the expansion of appropriate offerings.