

Gender affects awarding of research funding

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Credit: HH/Bert Beelen

Women are still underrepresented in top academic positions. One of the possible explanations for this is the increasing importance of obtaining research funding. Women are often less successful in this than men. Psychology researchers Dr Romy van der Lee and professor Naomi Ellemers investigated whether this difference also occurs at the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and examined potential explanations.

Scientific analysis of three Veni grant funding rounds revealed that female applicants received a lower prioritisation from reviewers. Van

der Lee (Leiden University) and Ellemers (since September at Utrecht University) publish their results in the scientific journal *PNAS* this week.

The researchers were assigned by NWO to carry out this study as part of the broader evaluation of NWO's procedures and its gender diversity policy. The aim was to gain more insight into the causes of the differences in awarding rates for male and female applicants for research funding. The analysis addressed an important 'talent programme' of NWO, the Veni grant. 'We specifically focused on the grant for individual, early-career researchers because the academic pipeline leaks most strongly in this phase,' says Naomi Ellemers. 'Whoever receives this grant has a greater chance of obtaining a tenured appointment at a university.'

Van der Lee and Ellemers investigated all the applications submitted by male and female researchers over a period of three years: a total of 2823 applications. Under the direction of NWO these applications were assessed by scientific committees consisting of men and women. The results demonstrate that the awarding rates for female applicants (14.9%) are systematically lower than those for male applicants (17.7%). Ellemers: 'If we compare the proportion of women among the applicants with the proportion of women among those awarded funding, we see a loss of 4%'. This is not just a Dutch phenomenon: the figures are comparable with the outcomes of previous research into the awarding rates of European ERC Starting Grants over the period 2007-2013. The current research also provides insights into the underlying processes that can play a role in the assessment of individual talent.

Female researchers at a disadvantage

The study reveals that women are less positively evaluated for their qualities as researcher than men are. 'Interestingly the research proposals of women and men are evaluated equally positively. In other words, the

reviewers see no difference in the quality of the proposals that men and women submit,' says Romy van der Lee.

In search for a possible cause for the differences in awarding rates and evaluations, the researchers also investigated the language use deployed in the instructions and forms used to assess the quality of applications. This clearly revealed the occurrence of gendered language. The words that are used to indicate quality are frequently words that were established in previous research as referring mainly to the male gender stereotype (such as challenging and excellent). Romy van der Lee explains: 'As a result, it appears that men more easily satisfy the assessment criteria, because these better fit the characteristics stereotypically associated with men.'

In response to the results of this research, NWO will devote more explicit attention to the gender awareness of reviewers in its methods and procedures. It will also be investigated which changes to the assessment procedures and criteria can most strongly contribute to more equal chances for men and [women](#) to obtain [research funding](#). This will include an examination of the language used by NWO. NWO chair Jos Engelen: 'The research has yielded valuable results and insights. It is also clear that an off-the-shelf solution is not available. Based on the recommendations made by the researchers we will therefore focus in the coming period on the development of evidence-based measures to reduce the difference in awarding rates.' The changes supplement the activities that NWO is already undertaking to encourage female talent in science, such as the programmes Aspasia and FOm/f.

More information: "Gender contributes to personal research funding success in the Netherlands." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1510159112](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1510159112)

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