

# Researcher refutes oversimplified view of gender balance

July 15 2016, by Jesper Werdelin Simonsen

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

On July 11 in Aftenposten, Professor Jill Walker Rettberg levelled a critique at the Research Council of Norway that strongly implied that women have a lesser chance of receiving research funding than men. She claimed that this is because the Research Council is not concerned about gender balance; but, fortunately, this is not the case.

For the Research Council as a whole, [women](#) and men have a roughly equal chance to succeed and obtain financing. In 2015, applications for [research projects](#) with women as project leaders had a marginally higher success rate (21.9%) than applications with men as project leaders (21.4%). For all categories of applications, those with male project leaders had a success rate of 37%, marginally higher than applications with female project leaders (36%).

To support her point, Prof Rettberg makes use of the grant rate for women in the last two calls for the Cultural Conditions Underlying Social Change programme (Samfunnsutviklingens kulturelle forutsetninger – SAMKUL). Relevance is an important award criteria in programmes such as SAMKUL. It's not enough to provide high scientific quality, the research project must also illuminate relevant issues and meet the criteria described in SAMKUL's Work Programme.

If emphasis on relevance has led to a gender imbalance in SAMKUL over the last two years, the question must be asked whether it really means that more women than men have not met the criteria, or whether the numbers reveal hidden discrimination. We believe this is not about discrimination. Moderate gender quotas, understood as a preference for projects led by women when quality and relevance are equal with projects led by men, have been discussed in all meetings in the SAMKUL programme during the process of considering which projects should receive funding. The numbers from other calls in the programme show another picture, with women receiving approximately 50%. Moreover, this sample is a relatively small. Eleven projects have received funding from SAMKUL in 2016. Consequently, the gender of one project leader can make a large impact on the statistics.

Prof Rettberg points out that Peer reviewers' and Programme Boards' decisions can be affected by implicit bias, and thus give women poorer assessments and a lower chance than they deserve. We totally agree that

this is a real risk. Therefore, we plan to intensify the work we already do to make panels and programme Boards more aware of implicit bias.

The Research Council believes it is essential to promote [gender balance](#). It is not desirable that we have three times as many male professors than women professors and twice as many male research project managers than women project managers.. It is important that institutions encourage and support female scientists. To move forward this process, the Research Council practices a system of moderate gender quotas . Quality is assessed by external experts on a scale of 1 to 7, so there is no doubt that some projects may receive an equal score, while the relevance is considered by the Programme Boards.. An important part of the discussion concerning similar, highly rated applications may take up the question of gender quotas and women may be favoured . This discussion should be a part of the award process as well as when evaluating whether the objective of gender balance has been achieved.

In her posts, Jill Walker Rettberg calls for more transparency concerning the numbers that show how gender balance and gender differences affect the likelihood for receiving funding. The Research Council has long published the figures concerning gender balance, and we have worked continuously to improve our analytics and increase transparency of all our endeavours. Prof Rettberg has made many good points, which we will take with us in our future efforts.

Provided by The Research Council of Norway

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