

Gender gaps in research funding are due to less favorable assessment of women, not their science

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An analysis of nearly 24,000 grant applications at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) finds that women are less successful in receiving funding if reviewers are explicitly asked to review the principal investigator, rather than when they are asked to assess the quality of the science.

The study is published as part of a special issue of *The Lancet* on advancing [women](#) in science, medicine and global health.

Compared with men, women are less likely to be viewed as scientific leaders, contribute more labour for less credit on publications, and are more likely to experience harassment. Women are under-represented as authors and in peer-review, and articles and conference abstracts led by women are accepted more frequently when reviewers are unaware of authors' identities, and women are underrepresented as invited speakers at conferences. Female faculty are less likely to reach higher ranks in medical schools than male faculty,

even after accounting for age, experience, specialty, and research productivity.

Across countries and disciplines, studies show that male researchers receive more [research funding](#) than their female peers. However, there has not—until now—been any firm evidence to explain why.

In 2014, the CIHR divided [funding](#) applications into two new grant schemes, one with an explicit review focus on the applicant, and the other on the research proposed, creating a unique natural experiment.

Overall, about 16% of grant applications were funded. When assessments were done primarily on the quality of the science (75% of the score), the gender gap was 0.9 percentage points. However, when they were done primarily on the leadership and expertise of the principal investigator (75% of the score), the gender gap was 4 percentage points.

"Our study offers the first robust evidence showing that gender gaps in research funding stem from evaluations of the scientist, not the science. Women are evaluated less favourably as principal investigators during assessment. Bias in grant review, whether individual or systemic, prevents the best research from being funded. When this occurs, lines of research go unstudied, careers are damaged, [individual rights](#) and potential go unrealised, and funding agencies are unable to deliver the best value for money. Programmes that fund projects, not people might reduce these barriers. Efforts to correct for cumulative disadvantage might also help close gaps that have grown over the course of careers. We would encourage all funders, institutions, journals, societies, and individual researchers to consider

the role they might all have to play to ensure rigorous, fair peer review," says author Dr. Holly O Witteman, Université Laval, Quebec City (Canada).

The study analysed applications submitted between 2011 and 2016. A total of 23918 applications from 7093 applicants (63% male, 37% female) were included. Statistical analyses included principal investigators' age and domain of health research. The authors note that no data were available on [principal investigators'](#) race, ethnicity, indigeneity, disability, or other characteristics that are associated with demonstrated disparities in funding and career progression. They encourage further research on all forms of bias.

More information: *The Lancet* (2019).

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