



NHMRC's Gender Equality Strategy

2018–2021



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Aim

The aim of NHMRC's Gender Equality Strategy (2018–2021) (the Strategy) is to achieve a gender-equal health and medical research workforce by supporting an increase in the retention and progression of women. The aim is underpinned by the central principle of '50:50—if not, why not?'

Vision

That all researchers have equal opportunity to participate in NHMRC funding schemes and are supported to reach their full potential. This requires environments which are free from bias, discrimination and sexual and all other forms of harassment. NHMRC considers that gender equality will have been achieved when similar numbers of women and men apply for, and are funded through, all NHMRC funding schemes. The outcome will be an improved health and medical research sector that will aid in building a healthy Australia. This vision aligns with the following statement from the World Economic Forum's [The Global Gender Gap Report 2017](#):

“Talent is one of the most essential factors for growth and competitiveness. To build future economies that are both dynamic and inclusive, we must ensure that everyone has equal opportunity. When women and girls are not integrated—as both beneficiary and shaper—the global community loses out on skills, ideas and perspectives that are critical for addressing global challenges and harnessing new opportunities”.

Gender equality—A priority for NHMRC

As Australia's leading funding agency for health and medical research, addressing gender equality in NHMRC funding schemes is a priority. There are clear logical and moral imperatives to promote fairness, transparency, equality and diversity in health and medical research. Despite this, it is widely recognised that women are under-represented in senior and leadership positions throughout the health and medical research workforce (Bell and Yates, 2015; the [Lancet series](#), 2018). Analysis of NHMRC data (below) shows that this under-representation is reflected in NHMRC schemes, in particular the Research Fellowship scheme and the Project Grant scheme. NHMRC aims to ensure that talented female researchers reach their full potential, that the investment in this talent pool is fully realised and that Australia's contribution to global health, medical research and building a healthy Australia is strengthened. The Strategy outlines NHMRC's approach and actions to improve gender equality in NHMRC funding, thereby promoting a gender-equal health and medical research sector.

NHMRC Fellowship schemes

NHMRC Fellowship schemes support researchers at all career stages, from early career, i.e. within five years of obtaining a PhD, to mid-career to the most senior stages. NHMRC's data show that far fewer women than men apply for the senior fellowship levels (Figure 1) whereas women make up the majority of applicants at the junior levels. This trend is also reflected in the percentage of fellowships awarded to women according to seniority (data not shown). It is difficult to draw valid conclusions about funded rates by gender for the senior fellowship levels due to the low number of applications from women; however the low representation of women

at more senior levels of NHMRC’s Fellowship schemes suggests disproportionate attrition of women from the research sector as they progress through their careers. Australia must retain this talent to ensure that the full potential of its investment in female researchers is realised.

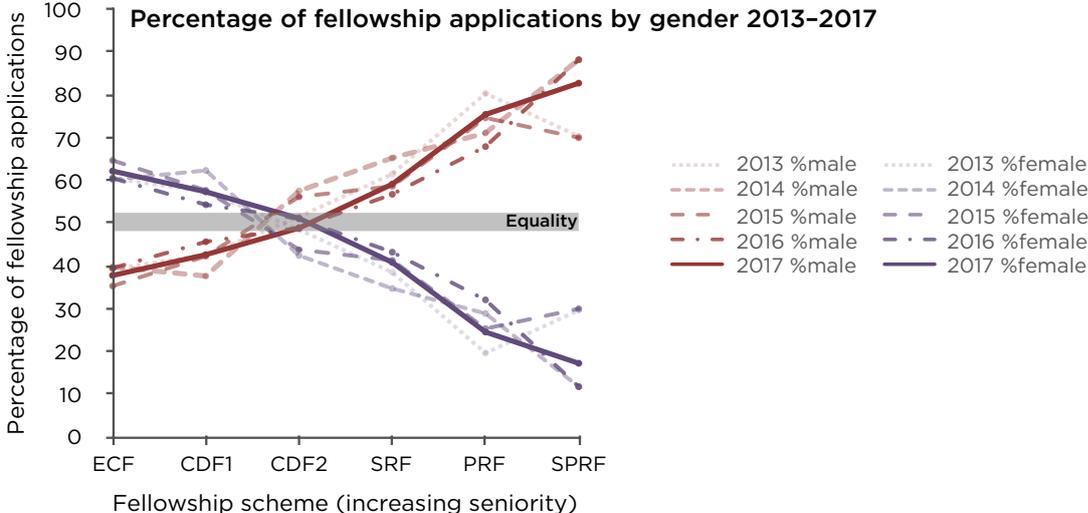


Figure 1: Percentage of applications by gender in NHMRC Fellowship schemes, 2013-2017. The percentages of applications from women (purple) and men (red) out of the total applications received over 2013-2017 are shown. Data for individuals who did not declare a gender or who did not select a fellowship level in the application are not shown (number was small). The region where approximate equality would be achieved is indicated. ECF= Early Career Fellowships, CDF1/2= Career Development Fellowships level 1 and 2, SRF= Senior Research Fellowships, PRF= Principal Research Fellowships, SPRF= Senior Principal Research Fellowships.

Project Grant scheme

The funded rate for Project Grant applications is consistently lower for projects led by women compared with men (Figure 2). This difference has existed in every year since 2001 and in almost all years this difference has been statistically significant. The Project Grant scheme has been NHMRC’s largest scheme, accounting for approximately 50% of research funding from the Medical Research Endowment Account. Therefore, the differences in funded rates by gender for this scheme have been a major focus for NHMRC.

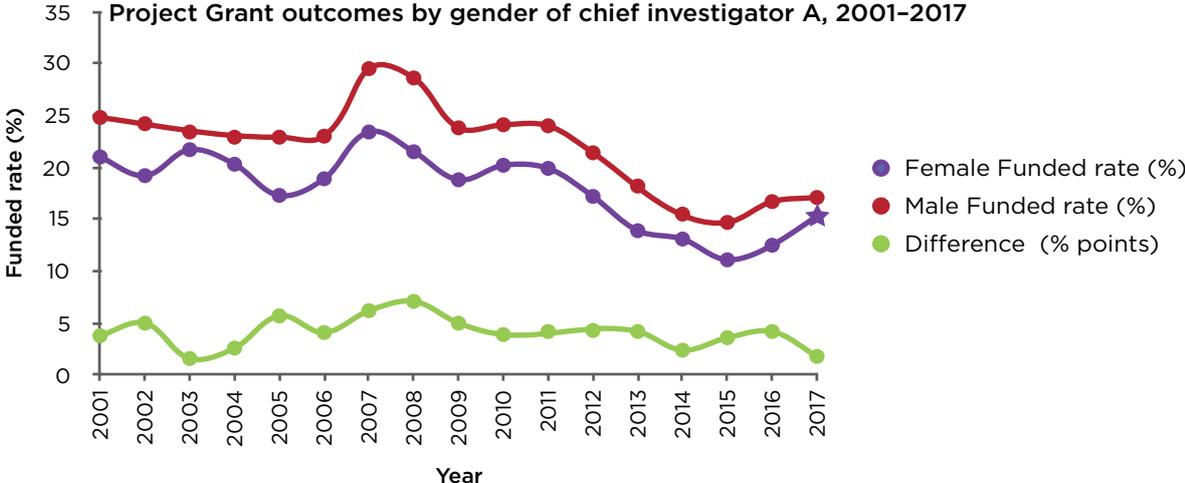


Figure 2: Project Grant outcomes by gender of Chief Investigator A, 2001-2017. The funded rates (i.e. the percentage of applications that are successful) for applications led by women (purple) and men (red) for 2001-2017 are shown. The green line shows the difference in funded rates between men and women. Data for individuals who did not declare a gender are not shown (number was small). These data include both Standard grants and New Investigator grants. The 2017 funded rate for women (star) includes 34 additional projects led by women, supported by an allocation of strategic funding.

Context

Achieving gender equality is better for everyone

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and it is increasingly recognised that diversity and gender equality improve workplace and organisational performance in a range of different settings. There is an extensive body of literature supporting these benefits: for example, a 2016 report from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency ([‘The business case for gender equality’](#)) describes in detail how a diverse and inclusive workforce regardless of size and industry improves organisational performance by increasing efficiency, productivity, innovation and creativity—features that are vital to the research endeavour. Gender equality is also associated with enhanced ability of companies to attract talent and retain employees. Employees value positive workplace cultures and environments that offer gender equality policies and practices, flexible working arrangements and support for employees with family and caring responsibilities. These benefits likely apply to the performance of individual researchers, both men and women, as well as the performance more generally of research organisations and the research sector.

Addressing gender inequality requires strategies that target the system

Currently, opportunities for men and women may be affected by systematic differences in treatment, conditions or expectations. Achieving equality will therefore require systematic strategies to strengthen the opportunities for women to participate, succeed and progress. This includes strategies specifically targeted to assist women to navigate the ‘labyrinth’ (Eagly and Carli, 2007) of career progression as well as institutional and structural change.

The Strategy aligns with current national and international activities

The Australian Government is committed to gender equality, both within the [public service workforce](#) as well as in governmental [policies and programs](#).

Development of the Strategy was informed by consideration of strategies and policies being developed internationally to address the universal under-representation of women in the research sector. For example:

- the activities of the [Canadian Institutes of Health Research Equity Strategy](#) to identify and eliminate systematic biases, and influence the health research sector to adopt equitable practices
- the establishment of the [Athena SWAN](#) (Scientific Women’s Academic Network) Charter to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women
- the initiatives in the European Commission’s [Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016–2019](#), which builds on the introduction of legislation for the equal treatment of women and men and other specific measures to ensure that a gender equality perspective will be integrated into all EU policies and funding programs.

NHMRC joins these international players with the release of this, our inaugural Gender Equality Strategy.

NHMRC initiatives to support gender equality

NHMRC has implemented a number of initiatives to support gender equality in the health and medical research workforce. These include:

- establishing the Women in Health Science (WiHS) Committee to gain a better understanding of the issues that women researchers face in health and medical research and barriers to career progression
- introducing gender equality policy requirements for all NHMRC Administering Institutions (AI)
- taking career disruption and other 'relative to opportunity' considerations into account during peer review and in determining eligibility for funding
- improving gender balance on peer review panels
- offering part-time opportunities across all NHMRC Fellowship schemes
- introducing the Elizabeth Blackburn Fellowship to recognise outstanding female research fellows
- the annual publication on NHMRC's website of funded rates by gender for all funding schemes to ensure transparency to the research sector
- engaging the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) to analyse NHMRC application and funding data by gender from 2001 to 2015
- introducing videoconferencing for NHMRC peer review panels to support the participation of people with carer responsibilities.

NHMRC used strategic funding to also award [additional Project Grants](#) with female Chief Investigator As in 2017 to reduce the difference in funded rates between male and female lead investigators and support women to remain in research.

Strategic objectives

Improving gender equality in health and medical research requires efforts by institutions and individuals at the local, national and international levels as there are cultural, institutional, social and economic factors at play. However, there are key areas that NHMRC can influence to improve the retention and progression of women in health and medical research.

The Strategy has three objectives:

1. to work with the research and Government sectors to improve gender equality
2. to support gender equality in peer review
3. to support equality in funded rates by gender.

1. Work with the research and Government sectors to improve gender equality

NHMRC's sphere of influence is complemented by others in the research and Government sectors. NHMRC will work in concert with other Australian agencies, including the Australian Research Council (ARC), to address the under-representation of women in the Australian research sector. A key priority of both agencies is to fund the best researchers, irrespective of gender, to undertake the highest quality Australian research and innovation. Other key stakeholders include:

- Research sector
 - The Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering, through the Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) national program is piloting the Athena SWAN accreditation program.
 - NHMRC Administering Institutions are in a key position to affect the research environments, recruitment, advancement and retention processes that underpin career progression in research.
 - Members of the WiHS Committee, NHMRC's Principal Committees and Council include active researchers who provide advice to NHMRC.
- Government sector
 - The Department of Industry, Innovation and Science's [National Innovation and Science Agenda](#) includes support of women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine and women in innovation more broadly.
 - The [ARC](#) is committed to ensuring that all eligible researchers, irrespective of gender, have the opportunity to participate in the National Competitive Grants Program, and is in the third year of its action plan to support gender equality.
 - Through the [Office for Women](#), the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet works across Government to drive policies and programs to advance gender equality and improve the lives of Australian women.
 - The [Department of Education and Training](#) is responsible for national policies and programs that help Australians access quality higher education, international education and research.
 - The [Workplace Gender Equality Agency](#) works with employers to provide advice, tools and a framework of best practice on gender equality. The Agency monitors and reports on the progress of Australian workplaces against standardised gender equality indicators.
 - The [Department of Health](#) encourages improvements to the health system by raising awareness of the need for health professionals to incorporate gender considerations when developing policies, programs and service provision or evaluation. The Department oversees distribution of the Medical Research Future Fund complementing work undertaken by other Australian Government funding agencies, including NHMRC, to fund research addressing national priorities.

By NHMRC working in conjunction with these stakeholders, progress towards gender equality in health and medical research is likely to be faster and better coordinated.

2. Support gender equality in peer review

NHMRC is committed to equitable application and peer review processes. NHMRC will review the processes underpinning the assessment of career disruption and track record, relative to opportunity, in peer review to ensure they are effective and equitable. NHMRC's New Grant Program will be monitored closely for unintended gender differences resulting from revised processes.

One of the principles of NHMRC peer review developed in 2013 is 'appropriateness and balance'. This principle requires panels to be constituted to ensure appropriate representation, including by gender. In 2016, women's participation rate across all NHMRC peer review panels was 43.2%, compared with 39.5% in 2011. This Strategy includes actions to further improve the representation of women on peer review panels.

3. Support equality in funded rates by gender

NHMRC funding plays an important role in enabling researchers to generate knowledge and advance health.

As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of women funded through NHMRC's largest grant scheme—Project Grants—is consistently lower than the percentage of men funded. Data show that consistent differences also occur in some other NHMRC schemes; however, the evidence is less robust because of fewer applications to these schemes. In 2017, NHMRC allocated strategic funds to support additional Project Grants led by women to reduce the difference in funded rates. This increased the funding rate for women to 15.3%. The funded rate for men was unchanged at 17.1%. NHMRC will monitor funding outcomes by gender for the New Grant Program (below) and take a range of actions to address differences if they occur. These actions may include the provision of additional funding, where appropriate.

For other NHMRC schemes, women's participation rates are lower than men's. As discussed above, this is a particular concern for senior Fellowship schemes (Figure 1). NHMRC will consider ways to address the retention and progression of women to support the advancement of early career researchers into senior and leadership positions.

The aim is that the representation, retention and progression of women increase as measures to improve equality in the application and peer review processes are strengthened.

NHMRC's New Grant Program commencing 2019

NHMRC has introduced changes through the New Grant Program and its peer review processes that may offer more flexibility for researchers and target some of the gender equality issues experienced by researchers.

Investigator Grants

Investigator Grants will support outstanding researchers at all career stages post-PhD through provision of a salary (if needed) and a research support package for five years. These grants will offer the opportunity to obtain a part-time salary with a full-time research funding package. This will enable, for example, researchers with child-caring responsibilities to fund their team to continue their program of research at full capacity while they work part-time.

Synergy Grants

Synergy Grants will support outstanding multidisciplinary teams undertaking innovative research to address complex problems. These grants will be provided to diverse research teams of talented researchers at all career stages, of different genders, with different career trajectories and in different research settings. It is generally acknowledged that the most innovative thinking comes from diverse teams.

Ideas Grants

Ideas Grants will focus on the science, significance and innovation of the research. The feasibility of the research will be assessed, but track record will not be considered during peer review. These grants will provide opportunities for researchers at all career stages, including early and mid-career researchers and those who have non-traditional or disrupted track records.

Action Plans and Evaluation

Annual action plans that outline key activities will be developed and will include annual measures, where appropriate. New actions will be considered based on the advice of the WiHS Committee, NHMRC's Principal Committees and Council as well as the broader research sector and in response to Government priorities and the national context. NHMRC will review the Strategy and its activities each year.

Note

NHMRC is using the United Nations-preferred term 'gender equality' rather than 'gender equity' because achieving equality is NHMRC's goal. The term 'gender equity' refers to the practices and ways of thinking that assist in working towards the goal.

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