



EPWS Position Paper
European Scientific Council – Strategy Notes
“The ERC Starting Independent Researcher Grant”
“ERC Peer Review Panel Structure – Starting Grants”

EPWS highly welcomes the intention of the European Research Council to concentrate its first round of grants on the promotion of young researchers. EPWS especially welcomes the ERC funding scheme for the significant opportunity it gives to young women researchers to embark on a scientific career. Given that the current conditions of the research market are based on gender codes and mechanisms that are not always as advantageous for women as for men, EPWS urges the ERC to observe a policy of gender mainstreaming and gender balance in all aspects of the scheme. Especially, the ERC must be careful to establish evaluation mechanisms unbiased with respect to gender and pay careful attention to how it defines its review of “excellence”. Also, from the start the ERC should try to encourage women to apply in numbers comparable to their male peers.

Applications and numbers of women

The ERC correctly identifies the lack of opportunity for young investigators to develop independent careers, and that this structural problem leads to a dramatic waste of talent in Europe. In the European Commission’s Report “*Science Policies in the European Union. Promoting Excellence through Mainstreaming Gender Equality*” (ETAN-report, 2000) a number of studies of grant giving institutions is discussed, in which the main conclusion is that women apply in too low numbers, as compared to their male peers.

EPWS therefore urges the ERC to build into the process an encouragement for women to apply and for peers and universities to consider them. Considering the eligibility of applicants, moreover, EPWS urges to reformulate the criterion referring to the applicable distance to the awarding of the PhD and suggests the following phrasing: “Applicants should be less than 10 years of full time work from the award of their PhD.” Otherwise, many women scientists (but also male researchers), for instance, who take a career break after their PhD to take over family caring responsibilities would be excluded from application, since when they return to professional life, they are junior researchers considering their stage of research, but more than 10 years may have passed since obtaining their PhD.

Peer review and women scientists

In the European Commission’s report “*Women and Science: Excellence and Innovation – Gender Equality in Science*” published under the direction of DG Research, a number of researchers have looked carefully at the mechanisms of excellence and peer review. While mechanisms to measure scientific excellence are thought to be gender-neutral, empirical evidence demonstrates that the way scientific communities handle their implementation can harm women scientists. For instance, studies have demonstrated that the review of papers is influenced by the sex of the authors: an over-rating of the work of men and an under-rating of the work of women can be identified. The most famous example is the study by Wold and Wennerås. Nepotism and Sexism

in Peer review, 1997, that found that women had 'to be 2,6 as productive as men to be perceived as equally competent as men'. (ETAN Report, 34)

Another study of reviewer selection among editors, and women scientists' performance as referees has shown that firstly, editors tend to rather select female than male scientists as reviewers for women's articles. Secondly, women scientists are generally stricter in their judgement than male scientists. The unintended consequence may be that although women are not always disadvantaged, they are judged using different criteria than applied for men, and women have fewer chances to get a piece through the peer-review procedure.

A further problem is the link between excellence and relevance of topics. Studies on the fields tackled by women scientists point out that women tend to cover different research topics than men. Due to a lack of voice in the scientific community, however, these questions rarely are looked upon as core interests of the disciplines and render it hence more likely that the work of women scientists is rejected on the grounds of scientific relevance as judged by a referee.

"Gate-Keeping" and its intended and unintended consequences

Of particular relevance to the peer review system intended by the ERC are more informal obstacles for women related to their presence in networks, the participation in conferences, and the engagement in the discipline through taking up various key senior positions of academic self-management. Again, empirical evidence such as the She Figures 2006 of the European Commission shows that women are underrepresented in key positions in science.

One of the identified reasons for this under-representation in key positions is the (historical) dominance of male scientists in the so-called gate-keeping function of researchers, which will also be performed by the ERC peer review panels. Senior scientists perform, among their various functions, also the function of gate keeping. In key positions in a university or in the scientific community, senior scientists can function as inclusion and facilitation on the one hand, and, exclusion and control on the other. If one takes into consideration firstly, that gate keepers even in countries with a high degree of women scientists such as Finland are predominantly male, and that even if unconsciously, a gender bias takes place in reviewing systems, it can be assumed that gate keepers also play a role in making it easier for men to enter the profession while making it more difficult for women to get past the gate keepers. They may do so in the deepest belief to promote the most excellent researchers, but due to the criteria employed for excellence, they estimate male researchers as performing best.

Minimising gender bias in recruitment and selection procedures

Clear recommendations for minimising gender bias in recruitment procedures are found in two significant documents of the European Commission, the "Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers" (Commission Recommendation of 11 March 2005 on the European Charter for Researchers and on a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers) and the Report on "Gender and Excellence" (European Commission, Directorate General Research, 2004: Gender and Excellence in the Making).

In the "Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers", the European Commission calls for an adequate gender balance of selection committees, based on a wide range of transparent selection practices. These practices should recognize that career breaks or a variation in the traditional chronological order of CVs are an evolution of a career with special value. The Report "Gender and Excellence" calls for awareness among all scientists, male and female, of the extent and the consequences of gender bias in measuring excellence. This should be achieved through special training programmes and transparent selection procedures. The following measures are taken from the Report (Gender and Excellence in the Making, p.31) and EPWS encourages to consider including them as guidelines for both ERC selection of peer review panellists and for the evaluation of grant applications:

- *Standards based on traits that are relevant to the pursuit of scientific knowledge*
- *Use of appropriate indicators of performance, rather than judgements lacking transparency*
- *Indicators chosen to fit the life-cycle productivity of scientists, both women and men*
- *Indicators chosen to fit the different scientific interests of scientists, both women and men*
- *Public availability of the records of a procedure – even making proceedings public to a certain extent*
- *Accountability of the members of panels in charge of procedures*
- *Gender audits on women's participation as well as on the gender dimension of research programmes should have effective consequences for a mark in evaluations*
- *“Professionalisation” of selection procedures by training panel members to look for and to correct gender bias*

The Report points out that recognition of the need and the method to reduce gender bias involves all participants in the process, both men and women, and emphasises that there should be excellence in practices of definition and measurement of scientific excellence as well as in excellence in science itself. EPWS therefore strongly recommends the ERC to include gender experts / gender expertise in the panels and in the support personnel of the program.

Gender balance in panels and among registered referees (peer reviewers)

For the work of the ERC and its review mechanisms, gender mainstreaming as well as gender balance are important. On the issue of gender balance in peer review panels, EPWS is aware that committees lacking gender balance may draft measures which might seem gender neutral but are actually discriminatory.

EPWS therefore urges to take careful consideration of balanced participation and encouragement for participation of women scientists. This applies to both the peer review panels and peer reviewers. EPWS recommends that the ERC follows the European Commission's target to include in all panels a minimum of 40% women or men. For this purpose, also self-nomination/registration for the peer review panels and the register of referees should be possible if gender balance is not possible on the basis of the current shortlist. Anyone holding a Ph.D. should be allowed to participate if he/she can prove expertise. Thus the pool of reviewers to choose from will become bigger and will hold more women – thereby allowing for quotas in the panels to be reached.

The peer review panel members – female as well as male - have to be made aware of the hidden disadvantages the scientific profession poses for women scientists. On these grounds, gender balance and gender mainstreaming should be considered in the evaluation of proposals and lead to a sufficient inclusion of gender in the approved applications.

The newly founded European Platform of Women Scientists EPWS is a non profit association with an international aim. The Platform seeks to promote women scientists by networking their networks and engage women scientists in the research policy debate. The overall objective of the Platform is to act as a structural link between women scientists and policy makers.

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