

Strategies to prevent or reduce gender bias in peer review of research grants: A rapid scoping review

Summary

We completed a rapid scoping review to identify strategies to prevent or reduce gender bias in the peer review of research grants. Only one study was found to be eligible for inclusion – an uncontrolled before-after study assessing the effect of gender-blinding grant applications. This study reported no difference in the proportion of women with successful grant applications after gender-blinding. There is limited research on interventions to mitigate gender bias in grant peer review.

Implications

This review identified a substantial lack of research evaluating the effectiveness of interventions for gender bias in grant peer review. It highlights the need for funding agencies to evaluate the impact of initiatives they implement to mitigate gender bias in peer review of grant proposals. Active strategies are needed to address potential gender bias in grant peer review to ensure that the creativity and innovation offered by our diverse population is not lost.

Reference: Tricco AC, Thomas SM, Antony J, et al. (2017) Strategies to Prevent or Reduce Gender Bias in Peer Review of Research Grants: A Rapid Scoping Review. PLoS ONE 12(1): e0169718. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0169718

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What is the current situation?

- Female researchers tend to receive less research funding than their male counterparts. In response to these concerns of inequity in the grant review process, several funders worldwide have started implementing strategies to narrow the gender gap.

What is the objective?

- To inform efforts at the Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR), we conducted a rapid scoping review on interventions to prevent or reduce gender bias in peer review of research grants.

How was the review conducted?

- We developed a protocol using the scoping review methods proposed by Arksey and O'Malley and further refined by the Joanna Briggs Institute.
- We included any study involving an intervention to prevent or decrease gender bias during peer review of grant proposals.
- Outcomes of interest included those that measured gender bias (awareness, knowledge, attitudes), or its potential impact (such as proportion of women receiving funding)
- We restricted our search to studies published between 2005 – April 2016 due to the rapid nature of this review
- Information sources: MEDLINE, EMBASE, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), PsycINFO, Joanna Briggs, the Cochrane Library, Evidence Based Medicine (EBM) Reviews, the Campbell Library, and grey literature
- Screening (titles, abstracts, and full-texts) and data abstraction were conducted by pairs of reviewers. All discrepancies were resolved by discussion or a third reviewer. Results were described narratively.

What did the review find?

- After screening 4798 citations and 726 grey literature records, 170 articles were identified as potentially relevant and their full-texts were reviewed.
- Only one uncontrolled before-after study evaluating gender-blinding of grant applications was included. This study reported no difference in the proportion of successful female grant applicants after gender-blinding.
- Our results suggest there is limited research on interventions to mitigate gender bias in the peer review of grants.
- Interventions to prevent gender bias should be adapted and tested in the context of grant peer review to determine their impact.

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