



„It’s the elephant
in the room“ –
gender (bias) in ERC grant selection

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Gender in ERC peer review process

“You know, it [Gender] is the elephant in the room. Everybody knows it's there.

We should be paying attention to it.”

(Panel member 3, LS, female)



Why is ,gender‘ an elephant in the peer review process?

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,Elephant in the room‘

*“A significant problem or controversial issue which is **obviously present** but **ignored** or **avoided** as a subject for discussion, usually because **it is more comfortable to do so**”*

(Oxford English Dictionary)



“I’m right there in the room, and no one even acknowledges me.”

Excellence in the ERC peer review process

“The ERC's peer review evaluation process has been carefully designed to **identify scientific excellence irrespective of the gender ... of the Principal Investigator**”

(ERC Work Programme 2014: 7)

Gender in the ERC peer review process

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*“scientific excellence
irrespective of the gender ...”*

*“We [the panelists] should be
paying attention to gender”*

*“Gender is the elephant in the
room ... because it is more
comfortable to do so”*

**No culture to talk about
and to practice gender**

**How to pay attention in
practice?**

**lack of gender awareness
and gender competence??**

**gendERC study: various levels identified where to pay
attention to gender in the ERC peer review process.**

Overview of presentation

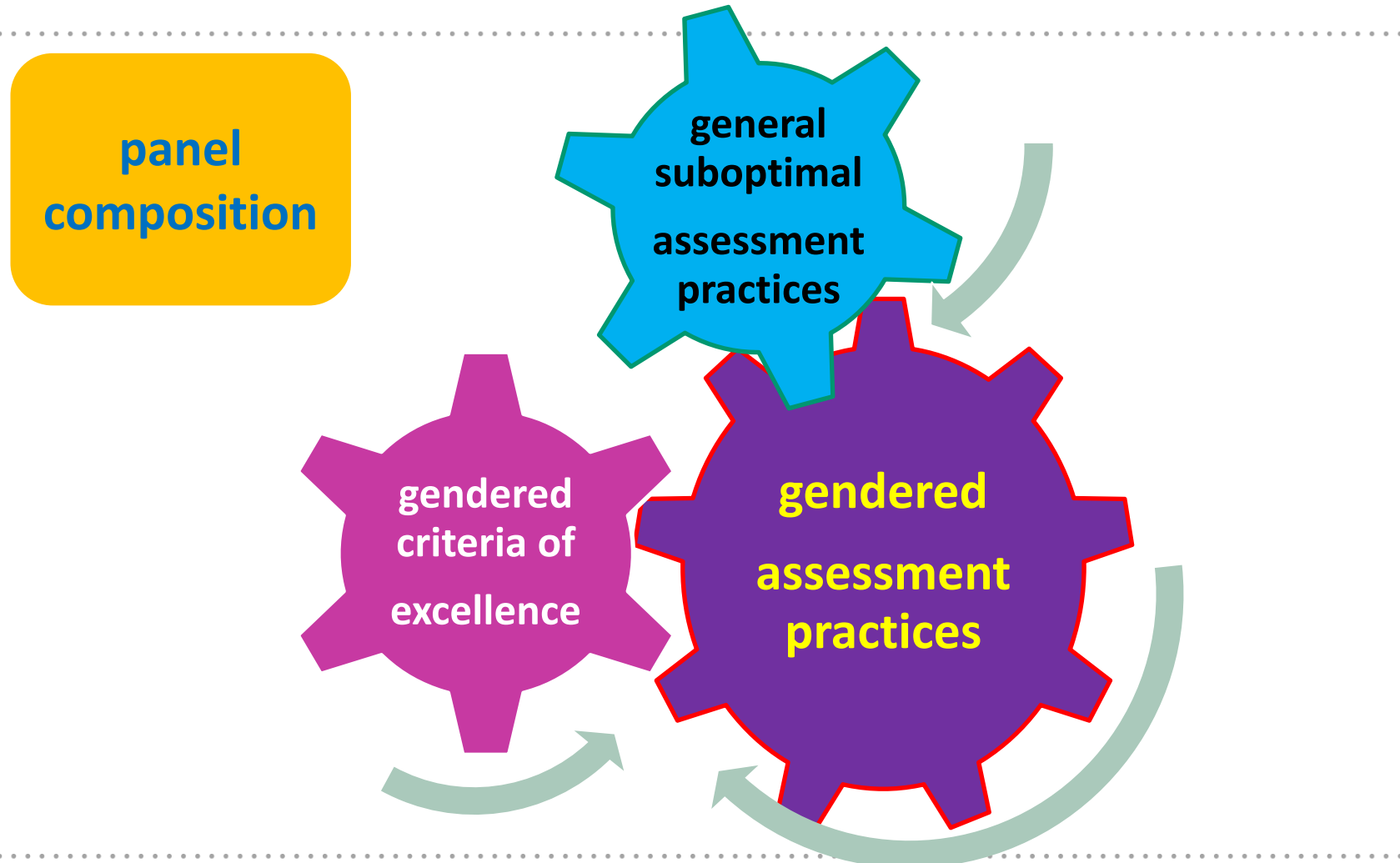
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Levels to acknowledge gender in peer review process / where gender and excellence are intertwined / where gender bias can emerge

1. Criteria to construct excellence deployed for female and male applicants
2. Criteria to construct excellence deployed in general
3. Criteria to construct excellence
4. Composition of peer review panels (by sex)

Levels: gender bias

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how to address gender bias (1): gendered criteria of excellence

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Excellence criteria are gendered themselves :
criteria/indicators reflect power structures in the science
system and perceived gender stereotypes

1) gender studies: women have less time, and network
ties, lower positions so they publish less, they are less
cited (van den Brink, Sarsons, Heilman): less excellent?

=> **deploying** gendered criteria **equally** to female and
male applicants may **reinforce imbalances!**

2) Panelists : report differences is perception /observation

Illustration: gendered criterion ,independence‘

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“In my experience, women are much more satisfied when they can collaborate with someone they know well, that gives safety. While men have the ambition to kick-off, to start their own thing as early as possible.”

(Panel member 31, SH, male)

“And perhaps women think that they don’t want to work against their former boss. And men think: ‘I will show him!’.”

(Panel member 1, LS, female)

how to address gender bias (2) general suboptimal practices

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Assessment practices are suboptimal in general due to lack of formalisation of excellence. That **enables gendered practices**.

(3) Excellence criteria are deployed unsystematically and individually:

- not all criteria are deployed to all applicants:
intransitivity
- different weight to different criteria
- informal criteria emerge

(4) No indicators are defined to measure criteria and to compare proposals:

- 8 different indicators used to measure ‚independence‘

Illustration: general suboptimal practices

“Definitely we evaluate productivity: That is definitely a category. Actually it wasn't true on the whole committee. I just felt that there were people on the committee for whom the 'Nature' paper was enough. And you couldn't argue with them and there was nothing on paper to argue with them. You couldn't say "Look, we should be considering how good the proposal is. The proposal is terrible. I don't care if they had a 'Nature' paper". There was nothing on paper that allowed you to argue with that person....

The guidelines at [another funding agency] are more clearly articulated. There we have a piece of paper in front of us by which we can say: "Absolutely not, he/she didn't fulfil the following points...". It's not about having a 'Nature' paper.”

(Panel member 3, LS, female)

how to address gender bias (3): gendered practices

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Excellence criteria are deployed differently to female and male applicants:

- (1) Male behavior is taken as norm: overselling
- (2) Masculine excellence criteria are dropped for male applicants

Illustration: gendered practices

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*“When you saw that he or she knows a lot about it and was just presenting in a not optimal way you are tolerant and say that it's a question of time and **she [sic!] will be able to oversell**”.*

(Panel member 28, LS, female)

Applicants' perception of 'selling science' as criteria of excellence:

*“Throughout the application process I was continually told to “big myself up”, using superlatives and hyperbole to describe my achievements. I didn't feel very comfortable with that **and I don't think it comes naturally to many female applicants (possibly not to many male applicants either, though)**.”*

(Applicant, female)

Illustration: gendered practices

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*“One has to bring it up all the time, this thing with independence. And I think [panel members] bring it up more as an issue with females and **they tend to oversee it for males.**”*

(Panel member 12, LS, female)

“Women don't move as soon and as long as men to another country to make part of their research there. At the same time I noticed that some men have never moved out of their university (...). They start their PhD at the same university... And they also become professors at the same university. And everybody finds that they have an excellent CV. And for women it is sometimes mentioned that she didn't go abroad for her PhD or after her PhD. I think there is a gender bias in the assessment of the PI trajectory”.

(Panel member 32, SH, female)

how to address gender bias (4) panel composition

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The higher the share of female panelists,
the lower the share of female grantees
(StG 2009-2014: 150 panels)

⇒ gender awareness and gender competence are
not (necessarily) related to sex of panelist!!

Recommendations how to address the gender elephant

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(1) Acknowledge gender as factor in the peer review process

(2) Tackle gendered practices



- Identify and name them
- Make funding agencies and (external) panelists aware
- Mitigate them: videotape panel meetings -> produce short film that replays real sequences to raise awareness
- Reflect gender stereotypes and practices (trainings on unconscious bias)

Recommendations

how to address the gender elephant

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(3) Optimize peer review process in general

- Define criteria, provide indicators to measure criteria
- Fix weight of criteria (on panel level)
- Strengthen/formalise role of panel chair:
 - make sure that same criteria are deployed to ALL applicants
 - Save time to monitor gender distribution by step

Note: Standardisation can increase transparency and effectiveness in the selection process, but decision making stays subjective.

Recommendations how to address the gender elephant

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- (4) specify excellence (as funding institution)
- take into account gendered character of criteria:
reflect if and how gendered character can be
corrected

**Addressing the gender elephant
increases quality and excellence!**



Thank you for the attention!

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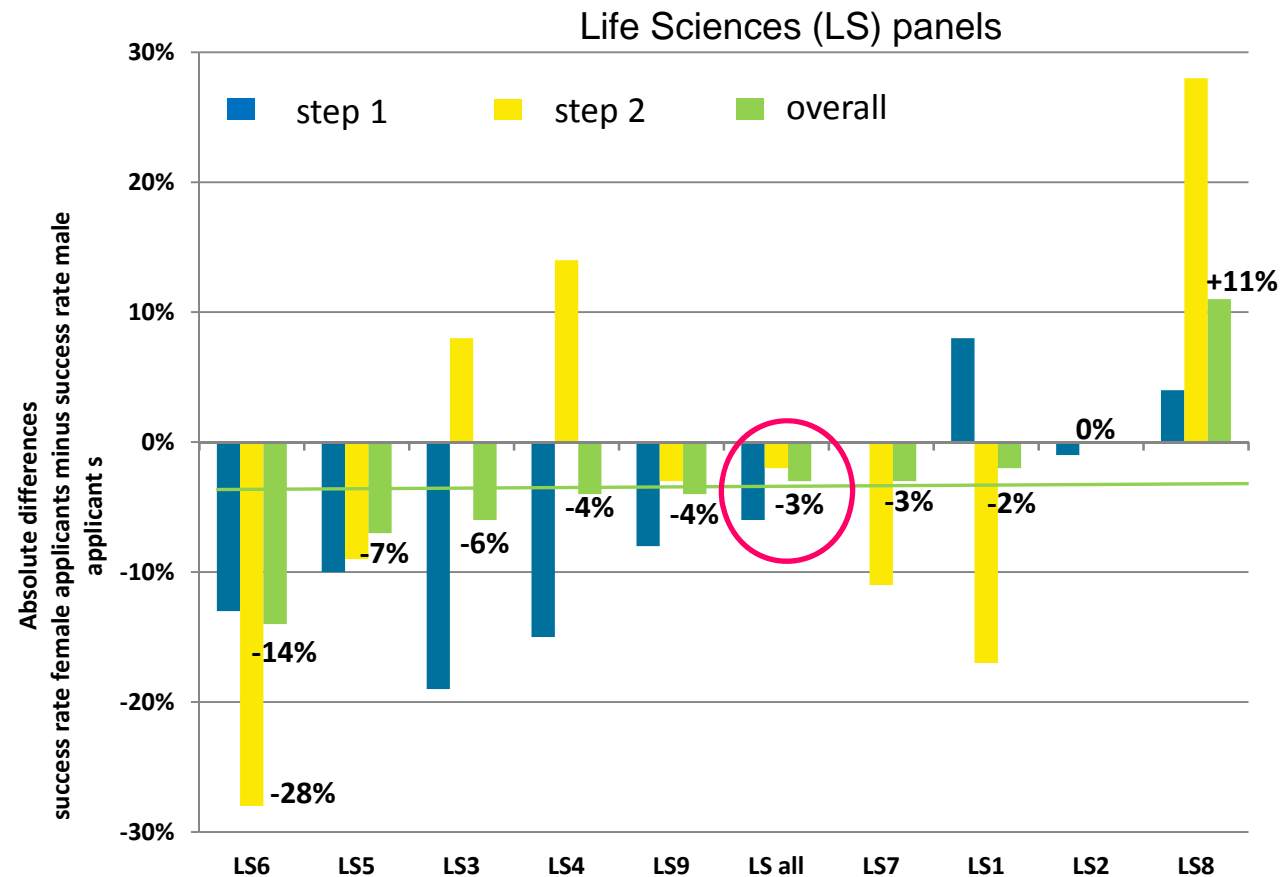
gendERC study

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- Aim: identify potential sources for gender bias in ERC grant selection (04/2014-02/2016)
- Methods/data:
 - ERC processes studied: interviews ERCEA, documents
 - Interviews with 32 panel members (3 panel chairs)
 - Evaluation data: related to past performance
 - CVs applicants, panelists: to measure cognitive distance
 - Online survey: sent to 3.030 applicants, > 40% response
 - Evaluation reports: word use analysed by applicants' sex
 - Multivariate model to identify gender bias

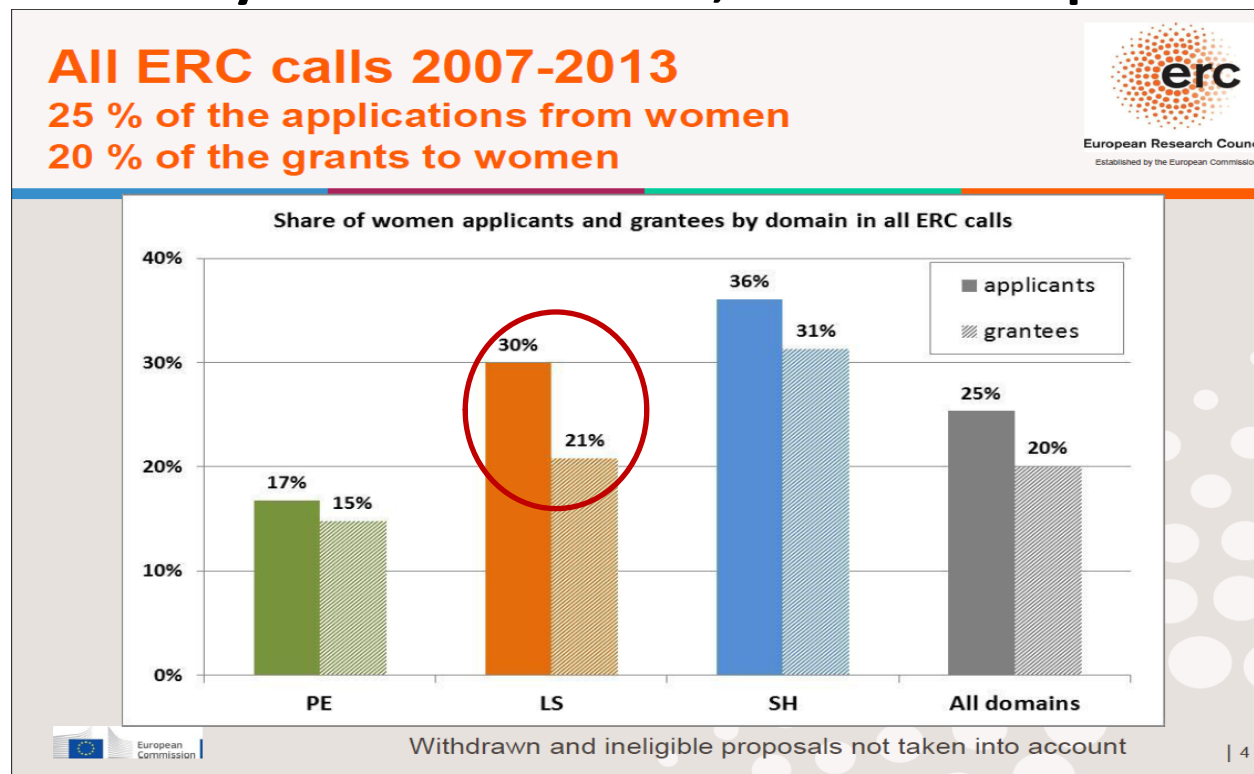
Why gender needs attention

- systematically lower success rates of female applicants in all ERC grants, all years (only 1 exception: CoG 2015)
- high variation between/within panels: see LS domain



StG 2014 as case to study

Scope of analysis: ERC StG 2014, Life Science panels (LS) studied



*Share of female applicants and grantees per domain in ERC Starting Grants calls (2007 - 2013),
 Source: EC 2014*