

Association for Women in the Sciences



Feedback on Te Ara Paerangi Future Pathways Green Paper 2021

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Who are we?

AWIS was formed in 1986 by a small group of women, in response to a need for more awareness and action on behalf of women in science.

Our Vision: AWIS wants a New Zealand where women are fairly represented throughout the science system, with pay equity and with policies that encourage inclusion and advancement for women in science.

Our Mission: We work to improve the position of all women working in the sciences, including those practicing, teaching or supporting science and those studying science at tertiary level.

Obstacles for Women in Science in Aotearoa

The fact that we are still needed as an organisation today, 22 years later, speaks to the insufficient progress that has been made to support those who identify as women as part of the science system.

Whilst progress has been made, the rate of change is still too slow and more needs to be done. In the past, women leaving the science system has been described as a 'leaky pipeline', where women leave due to individual or personal choice. We believe that the more accurate description of this is an obstacle course, where those who identify as women are choosing to leave because they are exhausted from trying to overcome obstacles [1].

These difficulties are not equal across scientific disciplines. The particular obstacle course that any individual faces is influenced by their discipline and their employer. The science system that we want to see develop from Te Ara Paerangi consultation is a system that has removed and mitigated these systemic barriers and has self-correcting measures in place.

We are advocating for MBIE to make equity and diversity a core principle of Aotearoa's future science system, and for MBIE to play a clear and leading role in setting appropriate expectations for change/representation of those who identify as women in any future science system. Without this prioritisation and expectation setting from MBIE, the progress for equity will continue to be too slow. Clear and transparent accountability points within any future science system will help us chart our progress towards greater representation and will help demonstrate a tangible impact for those who identify as women in the science system.

We have identified three key ways in which the current system has failed or has created obstacles for women in particular. We suggest that these perspectives are used to help inform the future design and development of a new RSI system.

1) *Lack of a stable but flexible career*

Science funding tends to be short term and with fixed duration. Scientists in short term contracts are always worried what to do next when funding finishes. Without access to long term funding, people can not plan long term careers. Government research priorities need to be planned in the long term so women in science can have a stable career. Women in science struggle with lack of a visible career path and development opportunities. In this sense, career mobility is fundamental for the development of our RSI workforce but is biased against women or those who act as the main caregivers for any dependents.

2) *A science system that is not inclusive and with gender-biased or discriminatory practices*

The current science system is not inclusive and is not an attractive career option to women, Māori and Pasifika, and those from minorities (ethnic, cultural, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ community). Our Māori and Pasifika researchers also have to manage the double labor of assisting their colleagues with cultural competency.

Research has shown that stronger teams are diverse teams [2]. Government funding streams need to put mechanisms in place that foster diversity of research teams. In this sense, quotas for research team diversity should be considered when allocating and assessing government funding.

3) *Lack of senior representation and poor work conditions*

Women lack senior representation and viable role models in the RSI systems. The growing need for scientists to work as managers with no training or appropriate support is also leading to increasing stress and burnout of its workforce, particularly women. The RSI workforce needs proper training and support, with a focus on health and wellbeing in research contracts. The training also needs to enable ECRs, in particular women, to explore diversity in RSI career/roles.

References

- 1- Berhe, A.A., Barnes, R.T., Hastings, M.G. et al. Scientists from historically excluded groups face a hostile obstacle course. *Nat. Geosci.* 15, 2–4 (2022).
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41561-021-00868-0>
- 2- Nielsen, M.W., Bloch, C.W. & Schiebinger, L. Making gender diversity work for scientific discovery and innovation. *Nat Hum Behav* 2, 726–734 (2018).
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