

## Women and non-white groups still missing out on top US research prize, finds study

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The number of women and non-white people in academic medicine and biomedical research continues to increase, yet the proportion of women among Lasker Award recipients has not changed in more than 70 years,

finds a study published by *The BMJ* today.

Only one non-white woman was identified as having received a Lasker Award over the course of seven decades, the findings show.

The researchers say these results are difficult to reconcile, given the ever-increasing number of qualified scientists from [diverse backgrounds](#), and they call for more transparency around the entire awards process to help address this issue.

The prestigious Lasker Awards, often referred to as "America's Nobels" have been awarded annually since 1945 to people who have made important contributions to medicine or public service on behalf of medicine.

Since 2014, the Lasker Foundation has publicly emphasized the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and advocated for women in science and medicine. Yet studies assessing the proportion of women among prestigious [award](#) recipients have shown that women are underrepresented among Nobel laureates and recipients of various international research awards.

To find out whether gender and racial inequities exist among Lasker Award recipients, a team of US researchers examined inequities in the gender and ethnic group of Lasker Award winners from 1946 to 2022.

They found that, among 397 Lasker Award recipients since 1946, 92.2% (366 of 397) were men and 7.8% (31 of 397) were women. Most award recipients were categorized as white (95.7%, 380 of 397) while 4.3% (17 of 397) were categorized as non-white.

They also found that the proportion of women receiving an award has not changed significantly between the first and the last decade (15.6% in

2013-22 compared with 12.9% in 1946-55).

And since 2014, when the first diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative was published by the Lasker Foundation, more men (86.8%) than women (13.2%) have received an award, and most award recipients have been white (94.7%).

The researchers also point out that time from receiving a terminal degree (the highest degree available in any academic discipline) to winning a Lasker Award does not appear to fully account for these inequities.

The average time from terminal degree to Lasker Award receipt is 30 years, they explain. Yet from 2019 to 2022, women have comprised a smaller proportion of basic and clinical research award recipients (7.1%) than would be expected based on the proportion earning life science doctoral degrees 30 years previously in 1989 (38.1%).

This is an [observational study](#), so can't establish cause, and the researchers point to several limitations, such as possible misclassification of personal characteristics and challenges in identifying the population from which award recipients are selected.

Nevertheless, they say these findings "establish the need for further investigation of possible factors that could hinder [women](#) and non-white people from entering the pool of eligible award recipients."

The findings also show that simply publicizing commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives does not necessarily guarantee change or equitable practice, the researchers add.

This study illustrates deep and persistent problems in academia that extend beyond prestigious awards to inequity in salaries, recognition, and academic promotion in higher education institutions, argue *BMJ* editors

Elizabeth Loder and Nazrul Islam, in a linked editorial.

Drawing on their own experiences and observations of these problems in their academic careers, they explain that the causes of inequity are complex and multidimensional and must be addressed through the creation of safe and inclusive environments, accessible and appropriate mentoring, and measures to improve our understanding of unconscious bias, systemic racism, and homophily (greater attraction for "people like us").

Moreover, they urge awarding authorities to make data on nominations and the composition of selection committees publicly available in a timely manner for independent review and scrutiny.

**More information:** Women and non-white people among Lasker Award recipients from 1946 to 2022: cross sectional study, *The BMJ* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj-2023-074968](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-074968)

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