



The gender woes of Australian NGOs

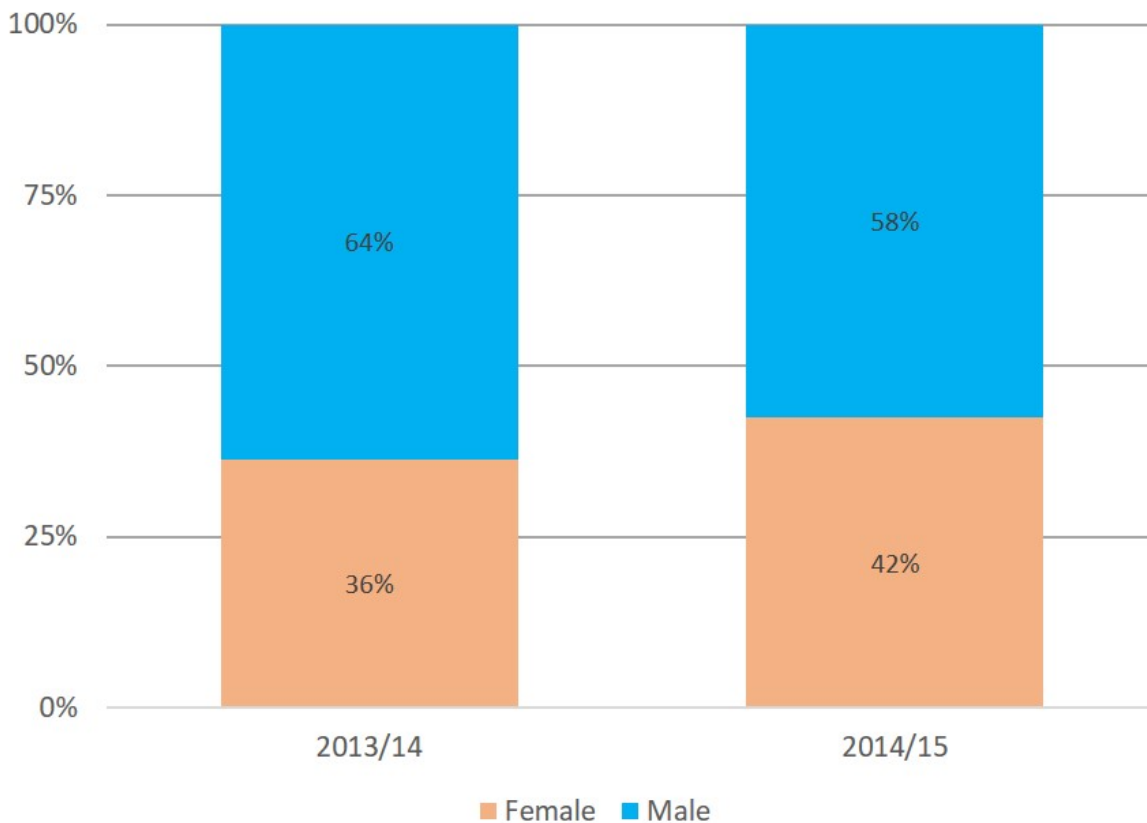
By Terence Wood
13 February 2017

Australian aid NGOs have a male leadership problem. The problem isn't that there are men running NGOs—there's nothing wrong with this. The problem is that a disproportionately high number of Australian NGOs have men at the helm. And, worse, my analysis suggests this isn't because of a shortage of capable women.

The two [most recent](#) ACFID annual reports provide the gender make-up of ACFID [member NGOs'](#) staff, boards and CEOs or directors for the 2013/14 and 2014/15 financial years. Not all Australian aid NGOs are ACFID members, but most of the major ones are, and there's no reason to think ACFID members are any less women friendly than non-members. The data in the annual reports come from ACFID's member surveys. Both years had response rates of about 85%. There's no reason to believe there was any gender bias in survey responses.

In the years of the surveys, a clear majority of NGO staff were women: 69% in 2014 and 66% in 2015. It seems reasonable to expect that this gender balance would be reflected in NGO leaders too. As the chart below shows, it isn't. In both years about 60 per cent of NGO leaders were men.

Gender of CEO/director of Australian aid NGOs, 2013/14 and 2014/15



Why? One

explanation could be that NGOs once employed more men than women. And, because it takes time to rise to the top, the current excess of male leaders is just a reflection of this by-gone age of man. Or it could be that women are hampered in their quest to become NGO leaders because they're more likely to take time out of their careers to raise kids. If either of these explanations were true, women would be under-represented at the top simply because there haven't been enough good female candidates.

It's possible these explanations may be partially true. But they're not the main problem. Not, because a shortage of good women candidates is something that ought to affect all NGOs equally. And, if this was the case, the distribution of male and female NGO leaders would be more or less random—it wouldn't be correlated with any other NGO traits. Yet there *are* correlations.

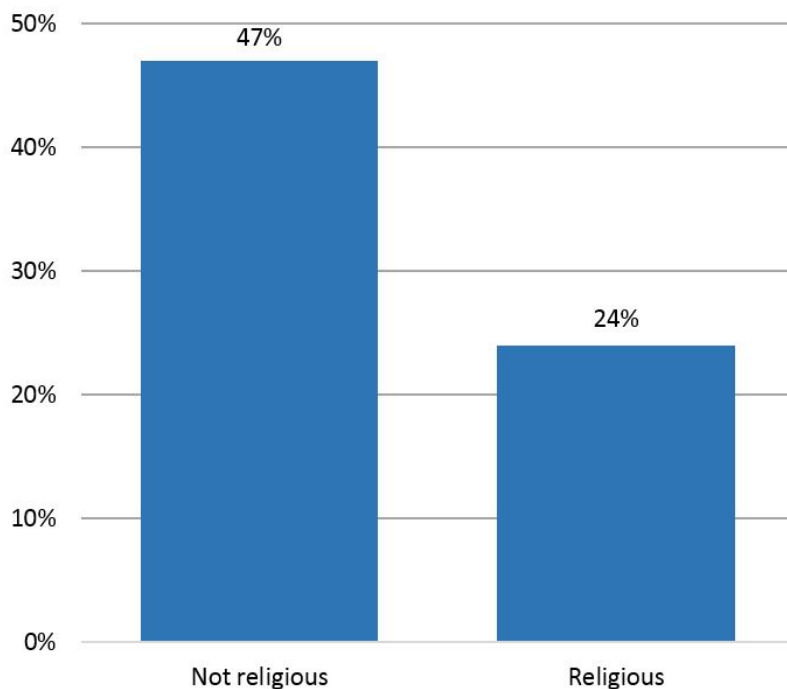
Fortunately, the correlations I found also highlight the type of NGO that needs to worry about this problem the most, and a good way of starting to resolve the issue.

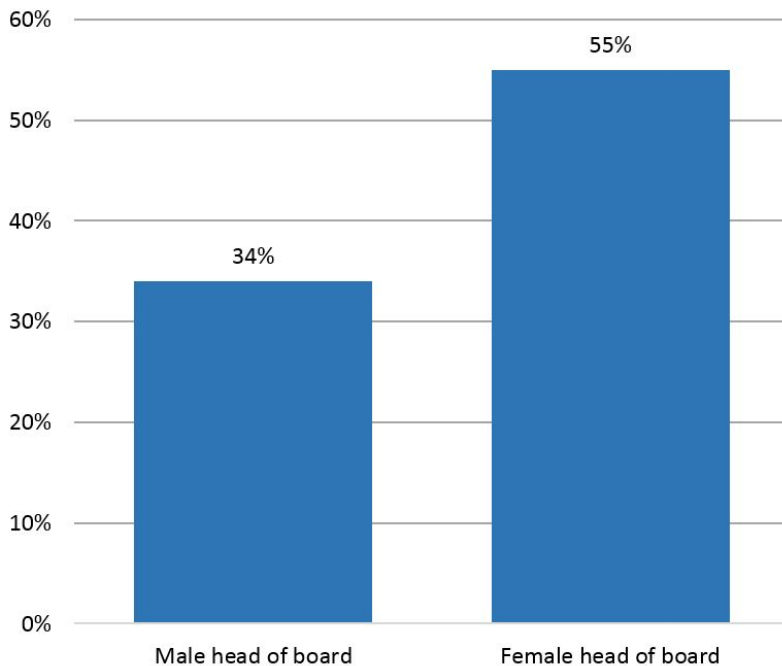
When I ran logistic regressions I found that, controlling for other traits, religious NGOs were much less likely to be run by women. I also found that organisations with men heading their boards were much less likely to have female CEOs or directors. These findings were

true when I looked at all NGOs and when I limited my analysis only to larger organisations. NGOs with more men on their boards were also less likely to have a female CEO or director, but this result was more fragile than the other two. (Regression specifications, the control variables I used, and the alternate specifications I used as robustness tests can be found in [this](#) spreadsheet.)

The chart below shows the average differences associated with religion and male board heads. On average, controlling for other variables, there's a 47% chance a secular NGO will have a female CEO. There's only a 24% chance a religious one will. There's a 55% chance an NGO with a female board head will have a female CEO. There's only a 34% chance an NGO with a male board head will.

Predicted probability of having a female CEO/director based on regression results





All I've shown is correlation, of course, not actual causation. In the case of religion, I'm pretty sure it's not a belief in a god *per se* that is the issue. My guess is that the culprit is an unobserved trait that just happens to be more common amongst some religious NGOs — perhaps a particular world view. In the case of the gender of the chair of NGOs' boards, a causal relationship is more likely given that board chairs are often the people who lead the recruitment of directors and CEOs. But it could still be some other unobserved trait, like world views, which causes both board chairs and CEOs or directors to be men.

Regardless of causality, my results point to a group of NGOs — religious ones — that need to pay the most attention to getting more women running their organisations. My results also suggest a good way all NGOs can start rectifying the imbalance in male leadership: get more women chairing their boards, and get more women on their boards. Even if issue isn't simply men chairing boards being more inclined to appoint men as CEOs or directors, getting women into senior governance roles on boards is still likely to help with organisations' world views and culture, and to make them more pro-women.

To be fair to Australian NGOs, they're [better than the private sector](#), and comparing the two years' data suggests a possible trend of improvement. But my guess, given the concern for women's empowerment which is-rightfully-so strong in the sector, this is a problem that people will want to tackle sooner rather than later. If that's the case, my advice is to start with the board.

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interests include aid policy, the politics of aid, and governance in developing countries.

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