Professor Veena Sahajwalla is a passionate and dedicated researcher in what can often be classified as a male domain—that of science and technology.

In August this year Professor Sahajwalla was awarded an ARC Georgina Sweet Australian Laureate Fellowship. This Fellowship will allow Professor Sahajwalla to undertake a dedicated research programme looking at how to transform toxic electronic waste into value-added metal and alloys.

However, the Fellowship runs deeper and the special award of the Georgina Sweet Fellowship allows her to undertake activities to support and mentor women in these disciplines.

In 2010 the then Government announced the addition of new dedicated female fellowships to the ARC Australian Laureate Fellowship scheme.

Named after distinguished and inspiring female researchers, the Kathleen Fitzpatrick Australian Laureate Fellowship for the humanities, arts and social sciences, and Georgina Sweet Australian Laureate Fellowship for science and technology are offered to outstanding female researchers.

Inspiring Australian girls and young women to pursue degrees in science and technology is a role Professor Sahajwalla takes seriously. This is why she has teamed with colleagues at The University of New South Wales to launch the Science 50:50—Inspiring Young Women into Science programme.

The Science 50:50 programme aims to inspire Australian girls and young women to pursue degrees and careers in science and technology so that they can succeed in an innovation-driven future.

In 2013 the Australian Council of Learned Academies released a report comparing international education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). A key finding of this report was that countries generally are grappling with the issue of under-representation of women and girls in STEM fields, and pursue a variety of gender equity policies and strategies to address this.

The report also said that in Australia, women’s participation in STEM has not altered substantially over two decades, and there is a case to be made for re-invigorating the agenda on women in STEM.

Professor Sahajwalla is one researcher willing to do just that, and in January 2015 she will be joined with some outstanding colleagues to launch Science 50:50 at an event at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra.

“It was an honour to receive an ARC Laureate Fellowship and in addition, it is a privilege to receive an ARC Georgina Sweet Fellowship.

“This gives me an opportunity to develop the 50:50 campaign through which we will be able to inspire young women to pursue careers in Science and Technology.

“Leaders from science and industry have expressed their interest in supporting 50:50 and funding from my ARC Fellowship will enable me to provide scholarships to young women studying STEM disciplines.

“Industry and science leaders have also made commitments to provide internships to young women, which is exciting as this will provide opportunities to get real-world experience in industries and in research laboratories.
“50:50 also creates pathways for young women to access mentors from industry and academia. This will enable young women to engage with leaders in various disciplines to explore opportunities through which they could pursue their passion for STEM.

“Our panel members at the 50:50 launch are leaders in their sectors who are pioneers and are creating opportunities for young students and researchers to pursue their interests and careers in STEM and make an impact.

“The panel members will discuss these opportunities at the launch to inspire young women and engage them in a conversation about 50:50,” Professor Sahajwalla said.

Challenging the stereotype of the scientist as a man in a white lab coat is something that Professor Sahajwalla takes seriously. She is concerned by statistics that show women and girls are under-represented in STEM fields through their education and career.

One example, in the discipline of computer sciences or engineering, is that 46% of boys tested in PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) in 2006 indicated an expectation of a career in this area compared with only 8% of girls\(^2\).

“Having begun my higher education as the only girl in my engineering class, I’d like to be part of a positive change,” Professor Sahajwalla said.

ARC CEO Professor Aidan Byrne (who is a 50:50 panel member) welcomed the new campaign and said it was important that all research funding bodies took affirmative action to ensure that female researchers were not only able to commence a career, but ensure they were able to return to it following breaks in their academic work.

“The ARC is extremely mindful of variations in career path and we ask researchers to provide evidence of their research opportunity and performance evaluation (ROPE) as part of the grant application process.

“ROPE was introduced to provide a more realistic consideration of a researcher’s capabilities and assist those who have had career interruptions for reasons such as family.

“ROPE provides a framework within which the quality and benefit of achievements is given more weight than the quantity or rate of particular accomplishments. It considers working arrangements, career histories and personal circumstances and provides an acknowledgement of research performance given the opportunities available,” Professor Byrne said.

Professor Byrne said he was pleased to see such a positive campaign underway.

“This is in part due to the special female Laureate Fellowships, but also the drive of those involved to ensure that they do play an important mentoring role.

“To see initiatives like this come to fruition is inspiring and is a reward for me as the CEO of the ARC.”

**What Science 50:50 will do:**

- create science and technology internship opportunities for young women
- launch a New Innovators Competition offering university scholarships to the girls who submit the most innovative ideas for solving real world problems
- create a video series featuring extraordinary women in research, industry, media and politics
- engage girls with science and technology via school visits, videos, the media and online resources
- recruit an expert Advisory Board across Australia’s leading science and technology industries
- create a web portal to showcase Australian innovators and link aspiring young women to dedicated mentors.

For more information about the 50:50 Science program or the campaign launch in Canberra, please contact Professor Sahajwalla or the Campaign Manager, Sarah Terkes.

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