

Academe's glass ceiling comes at a high cost to society

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If only men could become pregnant, Canada's innovation gap would disappear, and we'd have access to vast reservoirs of untapped creativity and brilliance.

This fantasy occurred to me while reading *Strengthening Canada's Research Capacity: The Gender Dimension*, the report issued Wednesday by the [Council of Canadian Academies](#) about the obstacles to women's advancement in university research.

(More than two decades after women started to outnumber men in the student population, they remain chronically under-represented among the ranks of professors, and their absence has research-documented consequences for all of us.)

In its comprehensive review of what we know about the problem, the Council's report dispels a few myths. (For the record, women are interested in research careers, the problem can't be attributed to cognitive differences, and solving the problem isn't just a matter of time.)

At the same time, in considering the inherent challenges of women's lifetime career trajectories, the report yields up some yawn-inducingly familiar stumbling blocks: the impacts of taking time out for kids, working a "second shift" on the domestic front, and negotiating an inflexible academic promotion system.

I admit that the authors fall short of offering up my fantasy solution, but work with me on this for a minute.

Gloria Steinem once hypothesized that if men could menstruate, we would treat the biological experience with considerably more reverence. I think the same principle might apply to the natural next stage: once equipped to reproduce and able to experience the hormonally-enhanced imperatives that follow, men would become even

more motivated to implement measures that would facilitate work-life balance, support different paths to tenure, and promote an enriched stream of solutions to myriad social problems. We shouldn't need reminding that nature rewards diversity, or that when everyone thinks alike, no one thinks at all.

The corporate community would benefit, too. Law firms, financial institutions and pharmaceutical companies are already clear about the profitability of retaining valuable women: as the report reiterates, collective intelligence correlates positively with women's inclusion, diverse groups outperform homogenous ones, and women's presence at senior levels raises both ethical standards and competitiveness.

But my proposed solution is tripped up by a classic Catch-22: until we actually have more women toiling away in research labs to discover how to allow men to conceive and bear children, we'll have to figure out other ways to capitalize on the talents of women currently sidelined by unconscious biases and unfriendly policies

Fortunately, the report offers some concrete ideas, culled from universities, governments and NGOs from around the world, including Norway, Germany and Sweden, Korea, the U.S. and within Canada itself. Its authors also provide a few specific examples of the kinds of innovation made possible when women researchers are supported in applying their experience-informed perspectives to real world challenges

It was a female design team that helped GM create a car made safer by night vision technology, seat adjustments for pregnant women and child safety locks. Parents also owe a debt to the female engineer in New Brunswick who 20 years ago created the first diaper-changing table for public washrooms, since adopted everywhere. And because of women's social and cultural roles in countries around the world, gendered perspectives applied to research problems also have the potential to increase agricultural productivity and school attendance, and reduce child mortality and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Such incentives are really the story of this report: the prospect of being able to more effectively address complex, intractable social, economic and environmental issues by

drawing on the talents of a broader and more diverse pool of researchers.

And it really shouldn't require widespread male pregnancy.

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