

Want to help women in science? Provide decent child care for starters ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

If I asked you to picture a scientist, what image comes to mind?

If you are like most Canadians, you will likely imagine someone in a white lab coat. Probably a man. Probably in his mid-50s with grey hair.

Maybe you picture someone like Nobel Laureate Tim Hunt, who was recently in the news regarding his gender-biased comments about women working in labs.

As a female scientist running a successful research lab in Nova Scotia, I'm compelled to seize this opportunity to show young women in particular that they can have successful careers in science and engineering.

This male lab-coat-clad stereotype is so ingrained that it is no wonder that the percentage of girls entering science and engineering programs in Canada sits at around 37 per cent, despite more girls going to university than boys. It doesn't have to be this way.

And it's a huge misconception to think of scientists in this way. Not only are there myriad careers that are STEM-based (STEM stands of science, technology, engineering and mathematics), but many scientists don't even wear lab coats on a daily basis.

Many do field work in exciting places. All work in a team. This is not an isolated work-alone profession for men only. Engineering and IT are the same. These professions help communities in many different ways. These aspects of the STEM sector need to be realized, acknowledged and shared, particularly with girls.

Some people think that given enough time, the statistics will change. The reality is, however, that the odds are still stacked heavily against women in these fields.

Earlier this week, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women released a report on women in the skilled trades, science, technology, engineering and math occupations in Canada.

This report's nine recommendations include that the government of Canada develop clearly defined outcomes that can help attract women to STEM-based work, that they support women in skilled trades, that they provide opportunities for women and girls to be engaged in STEM from an early age, that they support networks of mentorship for women and girls, and that they encourage girls to consider careers in STEM and highlight career opportunities and financial benefits.

The report includes responses from both the Liberal party and the NDP for all to read.

Although these recommendations are very good in some respects, they do not address the workplace changes that are needed. Women continue to have a gap in their professional careers when they have children, and this gap significantly affects their career progression.

With a lack of policies that enable women to take leave without negatively affecting their careers, and a severe lack of affordable child care available for children under two years of age in Nova Scotia, these statistics are unlikely to change for years to come. We cannot focus all our attention on one end of the pipeline.

My own daughter was on 10 wait lists from the time I was three months pregnant until she was six months old. She didn't get any of these spots — that's more than a year on a wait list.

This is a typical story for many professional women. If you don't have a car, you are even more limited. And many of us don't have a support system that can step in to look after our children. I couldn't imagine going through this with a second child.

So why should we step up and support professional women in the STEM sector? Because it is good for business. Research by the Harvard Business Review (2011) shows that having a diverse team (including women) brainstorming a problem increases the collective intelligence

and will lead to greater innovation.

Women represent an untapped resource that can fulfil the STEM labour market shortage in our province and across Canada (WinSETT Centre). This is good news for Canada's industries and our economy.

So the next time your child asks what a scientist does, tell them about the successful women in STEM of our past — Marie Curie, Jane Goodall or Rosalind Franklin.

Indeed, 12 Nobel Prizes have been awarded to women in the science disciplines in the last 15 years. These include Ada Yonath (chemistry, for her work on the cellular structure that reads genetic codes), May-Britt Moser (physiology/medicine, for her work in understanding how cells find their positions in the brain), Elizabeth Blackburn (physiology/medicine, for her work in figuring out how chromosomes are protected from damage inside cells).

Women should not have to fit into the stereotypical mould of STEM; rather the STEM mould itself needs to change. Having adequate and affordable child care after a maternity leave and having policies in place that ensure career progression is not negatively affected are critical steps towards supporting professional women in our province.

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Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

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