

## INVISIBLE WOMEN - DATA BIAS IN A WORLD DESIGNED FOR MEN

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In Ethiopia, there is a saying: "Chew Lerasch Sital Taft alebeleziya dengay neh belew yetelhual," which translates to "Dear salt, be a substance that adds flavor; otherwise, they will throw you away, thinking you are just another rock." In my Hot Book review of the book "Invisible Women - Data Bias in a World Designed for Men," I discovered that the lack of research and data on women renders them dispensable, easily removed and disregarded. Perez discusses the various ways women have been excluded from research and data because women are being treated like salt – to add flavor to life. When in reality, women give meaning to life and birth life. "Women all over: always the exception, never the default" (Perez, 90).



Why are women excluded from research and data? Is it intentional, or is it because women are not expected to engage in various roles, such as protecting the community as police officers? Perez points out design flaws in equipment like bulletproof vests and car seatbelts, emphasizing the oversight of not considering the diverse sizes and physiological changes in women's bodies. Throughout the book, Perez highlights intentional or unintentional exclusion of women from research and data, urging readers to consider the perspectives often overlooked.

As a feminist, reading this book has reignited the spirit of Gudit in me. Gudit, a queen in Ethiopia, who destroyed the Axumite dynasty.

However, creative leadership has taught me that blaming or destroying is not the solution; instead, understanding and addressing invisibility is key. The book prompts reflection on whether men's perspectives dominate, leading to biased designs and practices.

Perez delves into gender bias in the medical field, illustrating how the body skeleton used in medicine is based on a male model, disregarding the variations in women's bodies. She extends her analysis to various seemingly unrelated areas like snow shoveling practices, uncovering how gender bias persists in daily tasks. Women, burdened with caregiving responsibilities, are often prevented from advocating for their needs, contributing to their invisibility in various aspects of life.

In the case of snow shoveling in Switzerland, Perez looked at data in which the way the snow shovel is also gender biased. For someone reading that sentence, it could make you wonder how in the world a snow-shoveling practice could be gender biased. But looking deeper into the context, she discusses a term called "trip chaining," which means because women are mostly responsible for the 'taking care of the family' job, they tend to stop by the grocery store, go visit an elderly person, pick up or drop off a child, while men tend to leave work and head home or leave home and head to work, which is often a direct trip than a chain of trips. She found that women are often "expected" to do these roles of taking care of others,

which often takes the majority of their time, preventing them from advocating for what they want or in this case paying attention to whether or not the road that is being snow-shoveled affected them or not.

The book also explores job opportunities and career advancement, revealing that women often take part-time jobs due to their additional responsibilities. Perez's thorough investigation draws from global research, touching on agriculture in Ethiopia, where women play a significant role. Even in farming, gender discrepancies are evident, as women are expected to manage household duties after long hours of fieldwork leaving little to no room for self discovery.

The narrative introduces examples of women who advocated for themselves in professional settings, like Dawn Bovasso, a creative director, and a Google top executive who secured special parking for pregnant women. Dawn Bovasso, a creative director in a US advertising agency; where when opportunities rise, Bovasso has to make a decision between attending the dinner or meeting while having to forfeit the bill for a babysitter for her children, while her male counterparts just confirm by looking at their calendar. Bovasso had to make sure her children are also taken care of, and her house is in order. Bovasso, being in leadership, was able to advocate for herself and made a case about her spending on the babysitter to attend the meetings she is constantly subjected to, relating it to the company spending they are allowed on the company's credit card. Her male colleagues will spend money at a bar and have it counted as an expense where she is subjected to paying an extra \$200 to attend any after working hour meeting. She eventually convinced her company to agree to pay for her baby sitting bills if she had to attend meetings after the working hours. Kudos to Bovasso. The question is how many women are able to advocate for themselves and make a case? In the case of Google, a top executive was able to get Google to create a special parking spot for pregnant women because when she was pregnant, she was having difficulty walking long distances to make it to her office. Again, she is a Google top executive who can influence. How many women can advocate for such requests? “The truth is that around the world, women continue to be disadvantaged by a working culture that is based on the ideological belief that male needs are universal” (Perez, 86).

Throughout the book there are numerous examples, highlighting the pervasive disadvantage women face due to cultures rooted in the belief that ‘male needs are universal’.

As a creative leader, I recognize an opportunity to use my skills to address the gender gap. Clarifying and challenging biased perspectives, I can contribute to creating a more inclusive environment. Perez's



exploration of modernity reveals how everyday items, like phones, are designed with men in mind, perpetuating exclusion. The book prompts a critical examination of unintentional biases in product design and marketing.

For six years, I've held onto my phone, enduring numerous falls and occasional fixes. T-Mobile regularly prompts me to upgrade, but I'm attached to my trusty device. Little did I know, until reading this book, that my phone was designed for a man's hand. Perez sheds light on this intentional exclusion, with phones being designed for men's hands, and the average phone size doesn't comfortably fit the average woman's hand. The response from Apple, claiming the design accommodates women's handbags, exposes a larger issue: "male as universal and women as niche." She also concludes that the research shows "women are more likely to own iPhones than men" (Perez, 159).

Perez covers a wide array of topics, from toilets to career culture, structural design, public service, medicine, and agriculture. As a creative leader and a feminist, my initial expectation of discovering the invisibility of women evolved into a realization that women are not invisible because the world is indifferent. Rectifying this invisibility requires acknowledging and challenging the notion that the average man represents the average human.

Perez's discussions on career advancement and agriculture offer hope for generating ideas to rectify gender disparities. However, when she highlights life-or-death situations, such as female officers wearing bulletproof vests designed for men or medicines not considering the female body, the urgency becomes apparent. It underscores the need for immediate attention to rectify detrimental oversights that can have severe consequences.

So I leave you with these questions: In what ways can a comprehensive analysis of Caroline Perez's work serve as the foundation for an intersectional exploration of gender disparities, and how might strategically crafted educational initiatives, supported by diverse and inclusive research methodologies, dismantle the pervasive notion that "men's needs are universal"? Through the power of storytelling and visual communication, how can we employ social media campaigns and community engagement to not only highlight the complexity of varied gender experiences but also catalyze advocacy and activism for policy changes that address and rectify systemic issues? Moreover, in cultivating empathy through innovative initiatives, how might we challenge deeply ingrained beliefs, fostering a nuanced understanding that goes beyond a binary perspective and embraces the diverse and intersecting realities of individuals across different genders and backgrounds?