

Book Review

Women in the Blind Spot: Review of Invisible Women

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Bibliography of the reviewed book: Perez, C. C. (2019). *Invisible Women: exposing data bias in a world designed for men*. Abrams Press.

Invisible Women aims to expose the data gap and data bias between men and women in cases where most people would not even think about examining the given phenomenon from the perspective of gender. The book confronts us with a world that we cannot or do not want to see; one that has been designed by, and for, men. As you will see, contradictory to its title, *Invisible Women* is not about society being unable to see women. It is about actively ignoring the experiences, challenges, and – in some cases – tragedies that half of the population has to face.

Accordingly, *Invisible Women* is not a light read. It is thorough, well-researched, and full of thought-provoking facts. It does not only tell a story about data gaps but also presents an astonishing amount of existing data and research on it. The biggest strength of *Invisible Women* is the author's ability to turn the system's own weapons against it to show how biased our so-called meritocratic, fair, data-driven society actually is. Perez does this by ensuring the book leaves no room for uncertainty, with the final work having 70 pages of endnotes, most of which are references to research papers so that the reader can check all the facts presented.

How can a book with 70 endnotes still be fascinating? In the case of *Invisible Women*, the key is passion. Even though it is important to present solid data, it is only a tool to capture something unseen. As a reader, you can clearly see the human behind the book: an activist who has something important to say. Pointing out the absence of women is not new to the author. Perez is a British feminist author, journalist, and activist. She has led various campaigns focusing on the representation of women and, in 2012, created a website called Women's Room, the purpose of which was to collect suggestions for female professionals and to increase the proportion of women in the media. Later, she criticised the Bank of England's decision to replace Elizabeth Fry with Winston Churchill on the five-pound note, which left no women featured on the reverse of banknotes. The campaign had many supporters, and it inspired the Bank of England to feature the image of Jane Austen on a new ten-pound note.

The book is organised into six parts and covers a wide range of issues: I. Daily life; II. Workplace; III. Design; IV. Going to the Doctor; V. Public Life; VI. When It All Goes Wrong. Over the course of these chapters, *Invisible Women* presents research from very different fields. All the data is used to support the same conclusion: research and decision-making that is blind to gender leads to the disadvantaging of women. Invisibility can take many forms, but it always stems from a worldview in which the male body, experience, and lifestyle are seen as the universal experience. While becoming increasingly common in disciplines of the arts and humanities, *Invisible Women* demonstrates that a gender conscious perspective must also be included in fields such as engineering and urbanism. The examples and facts presented in the book question the stereotype that feminist activism can only aim to overpower men and prove that female representation has a more significant relevance. In the third chapter, Perez explores the idea of how neglecting women can have life-threatening consequences. Since carmakers used to be ignorant of the differences in the anatomy of the male and female body, until 2011 they had only used crash test dummies on the typical male body. As women are typically shorter than men and have an overall differently structured body, this had led to women having had a disproportionately bigger chance of getting injured in a car accident.

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The fourth chapter, *Going to the doctor*, also presents topics that cannot (or at least should not) be seen as marginal problems. As the author shows us in detail, medical research and practice also fail to acknowledge symptoms and diseases specific to the experiences of women. For example, women are three times more likely to develop autoimmune diseases, which has been theorized to be because females evolved a particularly fast and strong immune response to protect developing babies, meaning that sometimes it overreacts and attacks the body. This leads to a very timely problem, namely women having more frequent and severe adverse reactions to vaccines. Even though some researchers have proposed developing male and female versions of vaccines, the discussion about how the COVID-19 vaccine affects men and women has only developed in recent months.

Some other facts presented in the book might not be as striking as the one's pointing out the life-threatening consequences of being blind to gender, but are diametrically opposed to the stereotypes we all learned at an early age. In the second chapter, *The Workplace*, Perez paints a picture that very much differs from the stereotype that female jobs are usually safer and easier than male dominated ones. As Perez writes „*Women working as carers and cleaners can lift more in a shift than a construction worker or a miner*” and „*nurses are subjected to more acts of violence than police officers or prison guards*”. But there is some even more cautionary news: Even though it is a clear fact that breast-cancer rates in the industrialised world have risen significantly, due to the lack of research, we do not certainly know why. All we know is that a higher rate of women than men tend to work in fields where workers are exposed to carcinogens and endocrine disruptors that are linked to a significantly higher risk of developing certain types of cancer.

Other topics are more in line with the typical debates about female representation but are important in showing the human side of the problem. Some examples are well known to the public, but Perez presents them in a new tone, that is moderate when presenting evidence, but righteously angry while drawing the conclusions. For example, the fifth chapter, *Public life*, primarily focuses on unpaid household work, which is not included in the GDP. As Perez writes „*Everyone acknowledges that there is economic value in that work, it's just not part of 'the economy'*”. This leads to treating women's unpaid household work as „*a costless resource to exploit*”. This attitude becomes visible in times of economic crisis. After the 2008 financial crash, social-care and social security budgets have been cut, so women had to do household work for less and less money.

I think that *Invisible Women* is a must-read for everyone, regardless of their gender and previous knowledge in the topic. It is a good tool for men who want to know more about the female experiences, but also a great starting point for women interested in feminist activism. As most reviews point out, despite its strengths, *Invisible Women* can be understood only as an initial step. It brings attention to existing biases, but we still must find a way together to be able to end these unjust practices. We need to close the data gap by increasing female representation in all spheres of life in order to make sure that women are not forgotten, and female lives and perspectives are brought out of the shadows.

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