

Strengthening Canada's research capacity: The gender dimension

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An in-depth, authoritative assessment of women in university research has found that although there has been significant progress in the representation of women in the university research ranks, there are still gender equity challenges that must be overcome and the passage of time will not be enough to ensure parity.

A newly released report by the Council of Canadian Academies entitled, Strengthening Canada's Research Capacity: The Gender Dimension provides an assessment of the factors that influence university research careers of [women](#). This assessment was requested by the Minister of Industry in the fall of 2010 after the notable absence of female candidates for the prestigious Canada Excellence Research Chairs program.

In response, the Council convened an [expert panel](#) of 15 Canadian and international experts from diverse fields who met over the course of approximately 18-months. The Panel was chaired by Dr. Lorna R. Marsden, President emeritus and Professor, York University, in Toronto. The Panel focussed on women in university research, and to conduct their assessment they used a life course model that allowed for an examination of the critical factors that impact career paths from the early years, through to post-secondary education and at different [career stages](#).

"There is no single solution to remedy the underrepresentation of women in the highest ranks of academic research careers. The issue itself is a

multifaceted one that is affected by social, cultural, economic, institutional, and political factors and contexts", commented Panel Chair Dr. Lorna R. Marsden. "There has been significant progress in the representation of women in the academy since the 1970s, and there is much to be celebrated. However, as evidenced by the wide variation in women's representation by discipline and rank, there are still challenges to overcome."

The Expert Panel developed a baseline of information regarding the statistical profile of women researchers in Canada. The major findings from the statistical profile are:

- In general, the Canadian profile is similar to that of other economically advanced nations.
- Women's progress in Canadian universities is uneven and dependent on discipline and rank.
- The higher the rank, the lower the percentage of women in comparison to men.

The Panel also identified key factors that affect the multiple career paths of women. These factors start early in life with stereotypes that define roles and expectations, followed by a lack of knowledge about requisites for potential career paths, and a lack of role models and mentors. These issues, combined with a rigid tenure track structure, challenges associated with the paid work-family life balance, and the importance of increased support and coordination amongst governments and institutions need to be examined if Canada is going to achieve a greater gender balance within academia.

Elizabeth Dowdeswell, President of the Council of Canadian Academies noted, "Although the Panel was constrained by a lack of data in some areas, they were able to identify critical factors that affect the career

paths of women in university research. With this information now in-hand an informed Canadian conversation can take place regarding the persistent challenges that are preventing women in research from maximizing their presence and potential across all disciplines and ranks."

Provided by Council of Canadian Academies

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