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Shafted by the glass elevator

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IN her book *Scientists Anonymous*, Patricia Fara describes how 18th and 19th-century botanist Jeanne Baret and mathematician Sophie Germain were obliged to present themselves as men to carry out their research. Naturally, today's female biologists do not have to pretend to be men to attend field trips, as Baret did. Nor do female mathematicians feel the need to employ Germain's subterfuge, studying by correspondence under cover of a male identity.

Yet even today a woman who wished to pursue a life in science would be making a shrewd career move were she to disguise herself as a man. In this way, rather than clambering up the cumbersome career ladder provided for women, she could instead sail to success on the glass elevator, the term coined to describe the invisible forces that conspire to keep everything that little bit easier if you happen to be a man.

Powering the glass elevator, in part, is the unconscious bias that makes it natural to see men - independent, assertive and task-oriented - in a demanding professional role. To see a woman in the same way we have to overcome the stereotyped belief that women tend to lack the more hard-nosed qualities so important for professional success.

As a woman, or a man, you may not be aware of this prejudice at work. But for people who experience work life as both a woman and a man - female to male transsexuals - the sudden insight they gain into male privilege is fascinating and shocking.

Kristen Schilt, a research fellow at Houston's Rice University in the US, interviewed 29 men about their work experiences before and after their transition from female to male. Her study, recently published in the journal *Gender & Society*, reveals that many of these new-made men immediately enjoyed greater recognition and respect.

Thomas, an attorney, related how a colleague praised the boss for getting rid of Susan, whom he regarded as incompetent. He then added that the "new guy", Thomas, was "just delightful", not realising that Thomas and Susan were one and the same.

Roger, in retail, found that now he was a man people would bypass his female boss and beeline straight to him with their questions.

Paul, continuing his work in secondary education, suddenly found himself being continually called on in meetings to offer his newly valuable opinions.

Experimental studies back up the gloomy impression that a woman would be judged more generously if she happened to be a man, even in the relatively egalitarian world of academe. More than 100 university psychologists were asked to rate the CV of "Dr Karen Miller" or "Dr Brian Miller", fictitious applicants for a tenure-track job. The CVs were identical, apart from the name.

Yet the male Miller received significantly more votes to be hired and was perceived (by both male and female reviewers) to have better research, teaching and service experience than the luckless female Miller.

Even were a woman's application to be scrutinised gender-blind, she could still suffer a subtle disadvantage compared with her male counterparts, according to a recent analysis of more than 300 letters of recommendation for medical faculty positions. Researchers Frances Trix and Carolyn Psenka found letters written for female physicians were likelier to be brief and minimal, and verbal fanfares such as successful, accomplishment and were much less common. Those writing letters of recommendation for female applicants also threw in more doubt raisers, lines such as "she tries hard to communicate with the patients", that left the reader wondering whether she succeeded.

Hopefully, by now you are reluctant to assume that this is because the female physicians were, as a group, truly less impressive candidates. But if you cling to this theory nonetheless, another curious feature of the women's letters of recommendation is not explained away so conveniently. Women's letters were littered with phrases referring to "her training", "her teaching" and "her application", painting studentship and teaching in the foreground of the picture of the female candidates. By contrast, scattered through the men's letters were strident references to "his research", "his skills and abilities" and "his career", thus casting the men in the far higher status role of researcher and professional.

Projects are springing up that bring to light men's unfair advantage. For example, the Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the US runs workshops for faculty chairmen of search committees. Part of the aim of these workshops is to point out the tendency we all have to take an unfairly doubtful view of women's achievements and abilities. Promisingly, science departments that sent at least one faculty member to such a workshop ended up with a 19 per cent increase in new female assistant professors, compared with a dismal 23 per cent decline in departments that did not participate.

Thanks to initiatives such as this, future generations may look back on us as we look back on Baret and Germain: with a sense of dismay offset by gratitude at how far things have progressed.

In the meantime, however, talented young women aiming high in science may want to consider investing in a high-quality fake beard. With manly bristles securely in place they, too, will be able to jostle in line for a ride on the glass elevator to success.

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