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Gender Inequality Goes Far Beyond Our Brains

An interview with **Sarah Kaplan**, Director, Institute of Gender and Economy, Rotman, University of Toronto

I was raised in the 70s and 80s, when the women's liberation movement supposedly was saying that we could be anything and do anything we wanted. I started working in 1986, and I thought the world was my oyster, and I woke up 30 years later and very little had changed.

The most difficult innovation challenge we have in society right now is gender equality, because we've thrown a lot of stuff at it and we haven't been able to fix it. So what's really interesting is a lot of people think that our challenge with gender equality just had to do with that we have biases in our brains, and so if we can only fix our brains, we would somehow fix the problem. But the challenge is that those biases, those norms that we have, really are embedded in all of our institutions: in how we think about who's promotable to leadership, about how we think about who would be a good entrepreneur, about how we think about what kinds of products would be interesting for the marketplace, or services. And so the solution is going to be changing those organizational and systemic structures that actually shape all the behaviours that we have.

I think a lot of times we can't even imagine what kind of economic outcomes would be possible if we were inclusive because we're so not inclusive now. By being more representative, by having the people in our society represented at the tables that make decisions — whether it's entrepreneurial decisions, corporate decisions, policymaking decisions — we're going to uncover opportunities, and we can't even imagine what they are because we've never been inclusive.



I've come to the conclusion that one of the reasons we're not making progress is that people don't really know how to think about gender in a smart, strategic, innovative way. And so the thing that I'm most excited about right now is a new program that we're developing around gender analytics. We need to actually help companies, our MBA students, policymakers, think about how to do analytics with a gender lens — whether it's policy problems, business problems, or social problems. Otherwise it's going to be another 30 years, and the next generation is going to wake up and say that same thing, and I can't let that happen.