

Why targeted funding for female scholars must continue

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This commentary is part of The Globe's series, Work In Progress: The Global Struggle for Gender Parity.

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Many people question the need for special scholarships and bursaries specifically targeted at certain demographic groups, but the need for these scholarships goes beyond levelling the playing field for all students. The costs of discrimination are not just shouldered by those on the receiving end; discrimination imposes costs to us all when it prevents some of our most productive members from playing an active role in society.

For example, I know that the reason I did not receive funding to attend graduate school was because I am a woman. This did not happen in the 1950s, it happened less than 20 years ago. And this was not a case of a woman thinking she deserves a grant over better-qualified men. I didn't get funding because the person responsible thought women should not be given scholarships.

I know that it is unseemly for a woman to speak of her success, but the story can't be told without sharing that I was an extremely good student. So good, in fact, that I was given both prizes that that department awards to undergraduate students, and was considered for a Governor-General's Academic Medal awarded to the student with the highest academic standing in the entire university.

Which is pretty good for a single mother, whose daughter was 22 months old when she started her degree and four years old when she finished.

In my final year at York University, I applied for a Canadian government scholarship to help fund my graduate education. When I received no funding, I went to the office of the faculty member responsible (who was also my professor at the time) to seek clarification as to why I had been unsuccessful. He explained that the process for allocating grants tasked individual departments with responsibility to rank applications, and that he had chosen to rank me seventh out of seven candidates.

He went on to explain that this was not because I was inferior to other candidates – he acknowledged that I was not – rather because he could see no reason to give a scholarship to a woman when there were “perfectly well-qualified men.”

I tell this story to many of my university classes today because it puts a human face on discrimination within academic institutions. And I tell it because it illustrates the role that discrimination plays in the choices that women make; choices that often lead to lower-paying jobs.

I could have become discouraged by this event and abandoned my plan to get a Ph.D. and become a university professor. And society would have said, “She earns less because she chose to have less education.” Or, I could have become disillusioned with studying in a male-dominated field, and society would have said, “She earns less because she chose to become educated in a low-paying discipline.” I could have let this event stifle my ambition, and society would have said, “She earns less because she has prioritized her family over her career.”

I did none of these things, of course, and instead I worked my way through graduate school accumulating debt along the way, much of which went to paying for daycare rather than textbooks. But in the end it was a special bursary for female graduate students that made my postsecondary degree possible. Its value was only one quarter of the Canadian scholarship I was denied because of my gender, but put food on our table during some very lean years.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, whose job it is to allocate Canadian taxpayers' dollars to deserving graduate social-science students, still follows the same process today for allocating grants; merit is not simply based on objective measures, but rather individuals within universities are given the opportunity to subjectively determine which students deserve funding, and which students do not.

It is this subjective approach to merit that allows discrimination to persist, and not just against women, but against many other groups of disadvantaged individuals.

An [Ontario court recently ruled](#) that a scholarship for white, heterosexual, single men was not in the public interest. I think that this is the right approach to judging the appropriateness of special scholarships and bursaries. As long as women continue to earn less than men, it is in the public interest to ensure that women are free to make the same choices as men. Giving additional financial assistance helps make those choices possible.