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“If you treat everyone the same, that does not necessarily result in equality.”

Caroline Criado Perez at the Edinburgh International Book Festival

“Women are treated as outliers, they’re treated as if they are atypical,” said Caroline Criado Perez, speaking today at the Edinburgh International Book Festival with broadcaster and writer Sally Magnusson about her new book, *Invisible Women*, which covers the “gender data gap”.

“The gender data gap is essentially about the fact that... the vast majority of information we have is based on male bodies and typical male lifestyle patterns.” Criado Perez explained. “And that is from economics through to medicine through to the workplace through to travel infrastructure, pretty much anything you can think of that we’ve designed - we’ve designed it based on data collected from men.”

The journalist and activist explained the real world implications of this bias, including in medical diagnosing. She spoke of how the most publicised heart attack symptoms are actually usually experienced by men, whereas common female symptoms are characterised as “atypical”, and the implications of that; “The result of that, which is once again positioning half the world as a niche minority, means that we don’t teach these symptoms in first aid courses or in public health information, and so one of the biggest problems is that women don’t realise they’re having a heart attack, so they don’t go to the doctor and then of course, possibly, they die.”

“We think we are talking about average human beings and we think that we’re speaking gender neutrally, but actually we’re talking about men.” She argued. “We are not outliers, we are half the world.

“If you treat everyone the same, that does not necessarily result in equality.”

Criado Perez also spoke of the backlash she experienced during her campaign to have a woman represented on the Bank of England £5 note, which ultimately succeeded with the inclusion of Jane Austen. She received numerous violent threats online during that time;

“Historically, and still now, the way we represent the world is hugely male dominated... we just don’t really realise we’re doing this but nevertheless of course this is shaping people’s worldview, this is shaping men’s worldview and women’s worldview. If you are a man growing up, being told that the public sphere is yours to inherit, and then a woman comes along and is saying, hang on a minute there’s this other part of humanity that should be represented, the men who were sending me these threats, the only way I think you can explain it is that they felt deeply threatened. There was some sort of existential threat to them as men.

“What does it mean to be a man? We’ve always defined successful masculinity as being dominant, as occupying leadership roles. What does it mean if suddenly women are doing that? We haven’t redefined what it means to be a man, we haven’t provided a new model of what a successful man looks like. And that is a huge bit of work that still needs to be done.”

As well as arguing for the redefinition of successful masculinity, Criado Perez called for increased diversity in the data industry.

“Data isn’t just about numbers and statistics, it’s also about perspectives. We don’t have enough female perspectives that are designing things. Diversity is an integral part of the design process, it’s not a nice little tick box to make us feel good. It’s actually about being able to create products that actually serve the people we’re trying to serve.

“The most simple thing, that everyone can do, is stop allowing the male to occupy the gender neutral spot. Because that’s actually what is at the heart of all of this.”