The Legacy of Discrimination

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If Astronomy were a new science whose launch was being proposed, its Case for Support would include all the available resources at the levels at which they would best deliver, and emphasize the wealth of all the available trained personnel. Accessing and assembling what would be available into a tapestry with full connectivity would then be pivotal, because it would be science-driven and not culture-limited. In practice, present-day outlooks are shaped and coloured by the elements that constitute their history. Astronomy’s history is particularly long, and the diverse cultural, social and economic factors which were very evident in its early years are still visible today, even though the tangible discriminatory factors may now be outlawed. The cyclic argument that “what men do is important because it is what men do” suggests the important inverse: “what women do is unimportant because it is [only] what women do”. Areas of our science have undeniably been labelled as “women’s work”, and the labels have stuck firmly. Tasks which appear time-consuming, long-term, unglamorous, even tedious, were habitually assigned to women “computers” whose wages were only a fraction of those of their male colleagues, resulting in a second-class citizenship for products such as stellar classification, catalogues, plate archives and information retrieval (aka librarianship). The era when women were denied telescope time owing to a lack of dual toilet facilities is (happily) passed, but the pervading ethos of modern research continues to be angled towards the deep and narrow (statistically the product of a “male” mind) and to de-emphasize the counterpart (the broad and the interrelating), to the continuing detriment of Astronomy as a whole.