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USPTO report profiles women inventors named on US patents

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On 11 February the USPTO released a report titled "Progress and potential: a profile of women inventors on US patents" on the trends and characteristics of women inventors named on US patents over the last 40 years. Prepared by the Office of the Chief Economist, the report shows a modest increase in the number of women inventors, but documents that women still make up a small minority of inventors and highlights the untapped potential of women to spur innovation.

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Between 1978 and 1997, the percentage of US patents (limited to those having at least one US resident inventor) with at least one female inventor increased from 5% to 14%, reflecting a low starting point and expanding opportunities for women to become inventors. However, from 1998 to 2016, the share increased more slowly from 15% to 21%.

The percentage of unique women inventors across all US patents in a given year shows a similar trend, but at a slower pace. Through the mid-1980s, women comprised less than 5% of inventors. This reached 10% in 2000. Sixteen years later, the rate of women inventors has increased to 12% only.

Among other trends noted by the report is that technology-intensive US states, and those states where more women participate in the workforce, have higher rates of women inventors (with Delaware, the District of Columbia and New Jersey exhibiting the highest rates from 2012 to 2016). And while women are comprising an increasing percentage of the total science and engineering workforce (28% in 2015), that participation is not yet leading to broad increases in the inventor rate (12% in 2015). The technology sectors with the highest rates of women inventors for the last decade are design and chemistry.

Inventor rates also differ by patent ownership. From 2007 to 2016, the inventor rate was nearly 20% for universities and hospitals, 15% for public research organisations and just under 15% for individual-owned patents. The rate for businesses is persistently the lowest

and is only 12% over the last decade. This varies greatly by type of business, with the highest rate (eg, 21% to 28%) among chemical and pharmaceutical companies.

The report further observed that women are increasingly likely to file for patents as part of a large, mixed-gender team. In the last year of the study (2016), approximately 44% of patents with at least one woman inventor had a team of four or more inventors. This is part of a larger overall trend since 1976, with a decline in individual inventor patents (down to 33% from a majority) in favour of larger inventor teams, often reflecting a collaboration among diversely specialised inventors.

The report concludes that the innovative potential of women is underutilised. It finds that women are among the "lost Einsteins" (ie, people who would have contributed valuable inventions if they had earlier exposure to innovation and inventor role models), and that harnessing this untapped talent would spur innovation and drive future growth.

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