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Where Are All the Female Geniuses? [Preview]

Women tend to choose work-life balance rather than the pursuit of eminence —although the choice is not entirely freely made

By Sandra Upson and Lauren F. Friedman

Try this simple thought experiment. Name 10 female geniuses from any period in history. Odds are you ran out of names pretty quickly. The message is clear: something is rotten in the state of genius.

Besting most of one's species is an accident of circumstance. The sequences of DNA nucleotides, arranged *just so* to impart intelligence, curiosity and passion, are part of that fluke event. More serendipitous still are the conditions needed for a person to devote decades to an idea or calling, deaf and blind to the distractions bound up in being human.

This article was originally published with the title Where are all the Female Geniuses?.

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In Brief

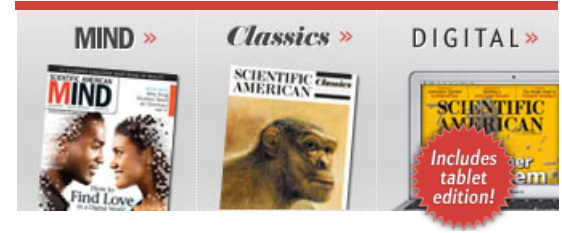
Under Pressure

For most of history women in the Western world were denied opportunities to seek higher education and develop their talents.

The dearth of women at the top of their fields is now often the result of compromises made for the sake of family, rather than differences in ability.

Women who seek eminence face difficult choices regarding when to invest in their careers versus their personal lives. More cultural and institutional support for women could dispel the lingering gender disparities.

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1. pdrazek@hotmail.com
03:40 AM 10/25/12

Another article being a feminist propaganda. Dear authors please read the biography of Marie-Curie. She grown during times when all the women unlike today were NOT invited in the universities, were NOT encouraged to become scientists, DID NOT receive additional support due to their sex. What make her different is that she was finding solutions and not excuses. She focused on mathematics, then chemistry and physics and NOT on gender studies and proving the whole world that the women are better than men. There are hundrends articles like this based on the same schema: list a few places were women are better or more represented than men and take one field in which they are not and blame it on culture, men etc. I wonder if it still qualifies as objective science (since most of authors are females...). When I was studying there already existed programs for women only (while there was none just for men), there were additional financing possibilities for female scientists with kids (male single parent can take care on his own no?) and still more men made it to stay in the universtity. How much more sex-based discrimination and promotion do you need? Are you really interested in science and development or just in sex propaganda at all cost? When readind such articles I feel discriminated. It seems for science it matters more what I have in my pants than what I have in my brain.

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2. Libby Tarian
12:16 PM 11/17/12

You forgot a word. RECOGNIZED genius.

Until very recently, unless you had men around you who accepted your genius superiority (yeah right like that happened a lot) showing up the men in power in your life (all men had power over women) was about as good a survival skill as a slave showing up the master or a low ranking employee outsmarting a proud arrogant boss. Just dumb. Even now, being a smart woman has perils men never experience. At work, at home, dating, in public life. To overlook this is more dumbness in itself.

There have always been women geniuses. In the past they handed their ideas over to their husbands to claim as their own if they wanted their ideas not to die with them. And I'm sure many a black eye followed that gift.

It will be interesting to see what happens in the next few decades.

Women have never been able to use muscle to get ahead in life

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and the idea that their sexuality was an advantage is absurdly naive. Men TOOK women who were attractive. There weren't any laws to stop them. Being attractive was a liability until rape and harassment laws started protecting women only about 30 years ago. Up to the late 60's most women went to the altar pregnant. Do you know why? Because all a guy had to do if he wanted to OWN a woman, was persuade her to go on a few dates, get her alone, get her a bit tipsy, sex her up a bit, promise to withdraw and then dump his load deep inside her and PRESTO - she's pregnant and walking down the aisle with him - no education, no career, no money to use to escape and social pressure to be "respectable". This is a best case scenario. Being date raped was the norm. Marrying you rapist was also the norm. Abortion was illegal and dangerous and inaccessible and birth control was in the hands of men who didn't care to use it. Getting a woman pregnant was easy and carried few consequences. Usually the rapist got a pat on the back and a quickie wedding. Everyone went along with it pretty much.

Seriously, does anyone think any woman now or in the past has insisted on unprotected sex with a man she wasn't sure she wanted to marry and raise kids with? When you are dating you don't know the person. They put their best foot forward for a while and if they run out of patience they got pregnant to force the issue. Recent studies show more than half of women today have experienced men pressuring them to get pregnant. Do people not realize how this tied women down to domestic drudgery instead of becoming a genius inventor. Pffft.

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3. sjfone
08:39 AM 12/13/12

Both excellent views, I should have worn my fencing helmet, but I have seen the silent pain, through the years, of women waiting for men to catch up and wait...

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4. dek0609
09:21 AM 12/13/12

what do you mean by genius? A business savy person? A scientific marvel? A charismatic politician? A great athlete? A prolific inventor? or just 2 standard deviations above the normal IQ. Ok, now name 10 geniuses. male or female.

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5. dek0609
09:25 AM 12/13/12

Now check out the membership demographics of Mensa. Fairly evenly split, and the vast majority you've never heard of even though we are distributed throughout all fields of work, pornstars, scientists, politicians, factory workers, garbage men, and even members of the 47 percent. Genius has nothing to do with notoriety.

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6. druhim
09:31 AM 12/13/12

This article is a great example of why SciAm should never have allowed comments. A reasonable point of view being comment



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7. JonCartwright
in reply to
pdrazek@hotmail.com
09:54 AM 12/13/12

@pdrazek

Marie Curie was only able to put to use her exceptional talent because her father-in-law offered to look after her and Pierre's daughter, which was unusual for the time. Otherwise she would have been "making excuses", as you put it, and raising her child by herself.

Also, it is incorrect to suggest that physics is male-biased in the same way that other subjects are female-biased. Here in the UK, for instance, the proportion of girls taking physics for their 16-18 studies is just 15%; that's far lower than the proportion of boys studying languages or other typically girl-predominate subjects. Those statistics (mostly) won't be due to childcare of course, but there certainly are other factors: lack of encouragement during upbringing and social pressures, for instance.

Presumably, girls and women will continue to benefit from "sex propaganda" until their opportunities equal men's. And vice-versa.

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8. timrun
10:35 AM 12/13/12

As an employer I don't think anyone has the luxury of discriminating against anybody regardless of race creed colour and whatever sex you want to be, nowadays you have to hire the best you can afford. But if some people wish to take issue as to why they are not hired they can always take the easy option of they have been discriminated against. Although Libby Tarian has issues way beyond this

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9. G. Karst
11:56 AM 12/13/12

Where are all the female geniuses??

Well, I can tell you where at least one is located. I am presently living with one and am happy to call her wife. She may be unrecognized by academia, may not receive awards and accolades, but she is a genius, in many aspects of life.

Why do so many people put such stock in ego distorting recognition?! GK

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10. CDBSB
in reply to [Libby Tarian](#)
12:45 PM 12/13/12

Libby T: I'm not sure where you got the idea that "pretty much" most of the weddings prior to 30 years ago were due to date rape, but I would love to see some of your sources. Preferably peer-reviewed and free of obvious bias. I doubt we'll see any, though. As a man who had a very hard time conceiving with his wife, I don't think it's all that "easy" to take

a lady out, get her tipsy, and BAM! impregnate her in one shot. I'm also a bit confused as to why you think that female genius attributed to husbands leads to black eyes. While I'm sure it is a possibility, just assuming that this is the norm is silly. Not all men are brutish neanderthals who behave themselves only because it's the law.

And GK, I couldn't agree more. What's the use of being a genius if all you care about is recognition?

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