

# **How Feminism Shortchanges Females**

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It is good to be here and a great honor to find myself a member of such a distinguished panel.

Of course, we are gathered here today because the organization largely responsible for the educational gender wars is now asking how to move beyond them. Somehow, this feels to me like Karl Marx calling a conference to ask how to get beyond socialism. Still, I am happy to offer a few thoughts.

I think the time has come for those fighting this war to explore a question that should have been asked before the first shot was fired. It is whether the females of America truly want the war against so-called "gendered behavior" being waged on their behalf. It is possible that many females are not troubled that sex-typical behavior exists; in fact, they may even like it. I also suspect that some females actually resent feminism's efforts to make them behave more like males in the university and the workplace.

One of the more radical aspects of this agenda is the quest for parity in science: that is, equal representation of the sexes in every field of science, engineering, and technology. Few realize the extent to which this thinking has advanced in our society.

A recent example came two months ago when a Congressional commission released recommendations for increasing the participation of women in science. In university science education, the Commission called for "*parity with respect to population distribution in enrollment, academic performance, and graduation rates . . . at each level.*" In the labor force it wants "*parity relative to the general workforce population distribution at different workplace and*

*management levels, and equity in retention, pay, and promotion rates."* This report has been sent to the President, all member of Congress, and the governor of every state.

My reaction to these lofty goals is "Why?" Why is it so important that two groups that have long made different choices be forced into sameness?

A common answer is that an equal complement of females is essential for high-tech industries and educational institutions to achieve optimal effectiveness. Proponents of this explanation say the reason is that females bring to the table experiences, viewpoints, and priorities that males do not.

This argument is noteworthy for two reasons. One, it acknowledges what feminism has long denied: that gender differences relevant to the workplace are real. Two, it makes no sense. When two groups differ in workplace-relevant traits, as is now admitted, it would be astonishing if their choices and outcomes there were the same. In fact, if they differ enough, identical outcomes will be impossible without an occupational police state.

This leads back to my original question. Is this sort of policing what most women want? If not, feminism is shortchanging women by putting its utopian vision before their career satisfaction.

Returning to science, gender activists will acknowledge that, after the elementary grades, fewer girls than boys say that they like math and science or want a career in these fields. But activists will not grant that girls know their own interests. They insist that girls would be equally interested in these fields were it not for sexist messages from teachers, parents, counselors, and textbooks.

Such a claim is possible only if one ignores a large number of facts that conflict with this notion. That females outperform males in some areas of math is but one example; obviously, if girls bought into sexist messages that they aren't as competent in math as males, they would not have better computational skills throughout life. Common sense as well as formal research tells us that the factors most relevant to career choice are individual characteristics such as interests, values, and abilities.

Females are actually well represented in many sciences. But let's consider two where they are not: physics and engineering. Both require strong mathematical aptitude. But while essential for competence, math ability is not enough to insure that these fields will be personally fulfilling. Interests and values that predict satisfaction with the work involved are also important.

Those who thrive in these fields typically place great importance on values that are considered theoretical in nature. Psychologists who have been working with mathematically gifted adolescents report that the boys are more likely to emphasize theoretical values, while the girls typically rate social concerns as far more important. Regardless of sex, people with high social values are most likely to find satisfaction in careers that involve helping people. They are unlikely to enjoy highly theoretical fields such as physics and engineering.

Research that directly addresses occupational interests also reveals notable sex differences. For decades, vocational psychologists have recognized a model that classifies jobs by six basic occupational themes. Most jobs have elements of more than one theme, but for simplicity, are often classified by the

one that best reflects their characteristics. The same is true of people; they will show interests in multiple themes, but also have a primary type.

The most widely used career test built around this model is called the Self-Directed Search. It assesses both interests and perceived competencies in the six themes. Engineers tend to score highest on the *Realistic* or *Investigative* themes. The Realistic type would rather work with things (such as tools or machines) than people. These individuals tend to be practical and mechanically inclined. The Investigative personality is characterized by a preference for activities that are scientific, analytical, and/or intellectual in nature.

On the Self-Directed Search, the Realistic theme is primary for almost 30% of males, but barely more than 3% of females. Investigative is primary for 15% for males and just over 9% for females. These numbers go a long way to explain the sex imbalance in engineering. Results also suggest that the goal of sex parity in fields like engineering needs to be reconsidered for another reason. While some females clearly have the interests and abilities that predict success and satisfaction there, the primary theme for 50% of females is Social, reflecting an interest in working with people. When the Social theme is primary, jobs classified as Realistic are the least likely to be a good fit.

I grant you that these and other differences are often attributed to socialization. Many argue that changes in the social environment could eliminate sex differences in interests. To me, this perspective mistakenly assumes that the "social environment" is something that Big People force on Little People. I think it is often the other way around. The Little People send signals to the Big People about what they do and do not like, and the Big People respond accordingly.

Parents who buy more dolls for a daughter are probably not forcing them her. More likely, they are reacting to observations that she did not find the toy truck particularly captivating, but lavished attention on her first doll.

I prefer to think of the social environment as a huge buffet table of experiences from which we make selections that contribute to our development. The average male and female probably differ less in the kind of experiences that they take from the table at least once than in the experiences that they keep coming back to have again and again. This needs an explanation. So does the reality that certain sex differences in preferences can be observed when we are very young . . . long before one can credibly attribute them to social pressures.

I think the explanation is fairly obvious. Extensive evidence shows that sex hormones affect both the structure and function of the brain. Personalities, preferences, and abilities are influenced in the process. Differences in the relative amounts of various hormones that the sexes are exposed to during gestation and at other points in life lay the foundation for sex-typical behaviors and traits.

It is not lost on me that this explanation infuriates gender activists. But if, as I am convinced, sex hormones affect our brains, howls of protest will not make them stop. Personally, I see no reason why evidence of biology's role should rock anyone's world. But to the extent that it does, it would probably be a good idea to get over it.