

Guest Comment

On **NRO**

Women Who Whine Too Much

Confessing to a nonexistent crime.

By Patricia Hausman, a consulting behavioral scientist & member of the National Advisory Board of the Independent Women's Forum February 5, 2001 9:20 a.m.

Nine members of the patriarchy met last week at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to ink the latest concession to feminism's Underrepresentation Industry. The high-ranking representatives of the nation's most elite universities pledged their commitment to "equity for, and full participation by, women faculty." Their institutions, they said, "recognize that barriers still exist to the full participation of women in science and engineering." What those barriers are remains a mystery — the statement cites not one obstacle that is causing women to become doctors and lawyers despite secret longings to be particle physicists.

All of this was nothing if not predictable: The latest chapter in a saga of sex, lies, and science that began two years ago, when MIT released a report confessing to discrimination against senior female faculty. The kvetch-filled document, penned largely by the same females whose complaint of discriminatory treatment had spurred appointment of a committee to study the "status of women," was greeted with near-universal acclaim. Press coverage was remarkably uncritical — often crediting the report with characteristics (such as evidence) that it did not have. Its principal author, biology professor Nancy Hopkins, was even feted at the White House by the President and First Lady. The Ford Foundation promptly kicked a million bucks into MIT's coffers, making possible last week's conference and other initiatives to "improve opportunities for women faculty" at MIT and elsewhere. (For more on the saga, see [here](#).)

Not a bad track record when you consider that this is a report for which "hatchet job" may be too charitable a description. And not a particularly artful example of the genre either.

With its collective intelligence, one might expect MIT to find it fishy that the report declared female faculty to be underpaid despite admitting that its authors lacked access to "primary salary data." Or that it would consider it in bad form for the same women who filed a complaint alleging discrimination to be charged with interviewing others to see if they, too, felt "marginalized." Or that

its scientific literati would see a certain hypocrisy in MIT requiring students to include not only conclusions, but also supporting evidence in their work, while refusing to provide any documentation for the report's claims that women were denied their fair share of compensation and resources. Intentionally or not, MIT seems to have put itself above the kind of full disclosure and open debate universally understood to be the price that scientists pay for the esteem accorded them.

And now for the really hard part. Last year, a colleague posed a hypothetical question. What if MIT actually released evidence showing that the claimed disparities between males and females truly exist? I conceded that this might indicate discrimination, but that first, one would have to consider other factors that often account for differences in salaries and working conditions. In one form or another, the question kept coming up.

Eventually, I enlisted the expert assistance of James Steiger, a statistician and professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia. Together we produced a report, "[Confession Without Guilt?](#)", that examines the productivity of two groups of MIT biologists. One is comprised of younger professors, the other of their more senior colleagues.

The results for the younger group were actually rather heartening. One of its men had a truly extraordinary output. But otherwise, the males and females were generally competitive with each other.

But in the more senior group, the results were — How do I say this politely? — noticeably different. Not that anyone had an unimpressive record. All had published a respectable number of research papers. Their work was cited in the scientific literature many times. But though all were impressive, some were far more so than others.

Three of six males in the group had published more than 100 papers in the last 12 years — a distinction held by only one of the five females. By contrast, four of the females, but only one male had published fewer than 50 papers.

Even more dramatic were differences in the number of citations to these publications, a common way to measure a scientist's influence. The most cited female scientist had fewer than 3000 citations. Three of the males had more than 10,000. One of the three was also principal researcher for 23 million dollars in federal grant funds that he raised for MIT during an 11-year period. (Not that the rest of his colleagues — male or female — were losers in the money game. All but one raised three to nine million from federal sources during the same time.) We made several statistical adjustments to account for factors that might enhance or detract from productivity, but these had little effect on the basic pattern of the results.

So, what do I conclude about sex discrimination at MIT? I don't have the information to venture an opinion as to whether the salaries and lab space allocated to these biologists is commensurate with their performance. But I can say this: If the guy in the next office had greatly bested me in

publications, influence, and grant money, he could have a bigger lab and higher salary without me filing a sex-bias complaint. Especially one explaining that my beef was not discrimination in the usual sense of the word, but "a pattern of powerful, but unrecognized assumptions that work systematically against women faculty even in the light of obvious goodwill."

And if I were running Feminism, Incorporated, I'd reread the rhetoric of the MIT report in the context of these results and ask, "Are we embarrassed yet?"