

Uncovering the science of the sexes

Biology, not patriarchy, is the culprit behind gender inequality in the workplace, a Montreal psychologist argues

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Montreal psychologist and author Susan Pinker at her home last month. "Male brains are wired to be more trigger-happy and to feel pleasure when rivals get their due," Pinker writes in her new book, *The Sexual Paradox*. "Could this have an impact on how men experience competition in the workplace?" Allen McInnis, CanWest News Service

Forget the patriarchy, long blamed as the major culprit against gender equality at work--a new book argues that biology may be the cause of what often precludes women from conventional success in the workplace.

Oxytocin, the hormone that drives women to nurture their young, may be behind women's failure to seize the corner office; sex differences in cognitive self-assessment may explain why women withdraw themselves from extreme competition at work; and the way their brains are wired may give males undue advantage in the winner-takes-all competitive spirit that drives many high-powered offices.

Such radical talk of gender differences would have been heresy when Montreal psychologist Susan Pinker first began questioning Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that biology was not destiny. The topic was heretical as recently as 2005, when it was partly to blame for the scandal that sank Larry Summers' presidency at Harvard after he remarked on sex differences in high-powered university faculties.

But in her new book, *The Sexual Paradox*, Dr. Pinker offers insights such as this about sex differences: "These biological factors can't help but influence women's attitudes to their work, including the more common desire among women to work part-time or reasonable hours;" or "Male brains are wired to be more trigger-happy and to feel pleasure when rivals get their due. Could this have an impact on how men experience competition in the workplace?"

This isn't a touchy-feely, "women are more emotional in the workplace" kind of argument -- Dr. Pinker is looking at the biological science that underpins fundamental gender differences in the way we work with each other, the way we view and demonstrate competition, the way we regard negotiation, and the desire to consult and communicate with others at work.

One example is how much of women's work choices may be attributed to the biology of empathy that drives women to want more connection and more meaning from their working lives.

She cites research that shows how girls and women make more eye contact than men when communicating; how even as infants, girls respond to others' distress more quickly; and how female rats and macaque monkeys use grooming of others to reduce stress.

When it comes to the biological underpinnings of competition, the sex differences are also significant. Male performance is boosted simply by having to compete, while female performance is automatically lowered by competition, according to studies that tested fourth-grade schoolchildren under different running scenarios in gym class.

In economic studies, women and men compete equally when there is money given for the most correct answers, but when a winner-takes-all scenario is proposed, the women's participation rate suddenly plummets.

On cognitive self-assessment, too, there are gender differences: "More women than men think they'll do poorly, even when they perform very well," Dr. Pinker says in the book. "In the competitive sphere this can look like discrimination, when in fact women may be withdrawing from the race of their own accord, based on their faulty self-assessments."

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Much of this explains some of the findings in a recent U.S. study by investment analyst Carolyn Buck Luce and economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett, who surveyed about 2,500 women with graduate or professional degrees and found that one in three women with MBAs chose not to work full-time -- compared with one in 20 male MBAs -- and that 38% of high-achieving women had turned down a promotion or had deliberately taken a position with lower pay.

"Instead of being forcibly barred from top positions by a glass ceiling, these women were avoiding them," Dr. Pinker says.

Beyond the job level reached, researchers discovered that when it came to what motivated them to work, having a powerful position was the lowest-ranked career goal of highly qualified women in every sector. For 85% of the women, other values came first: the ability to work with people they respect, to "be themselves" at work and to have flexible schedules.

The book attempts to detail the myriad biological differences that help explain the ambivalence, the uncertainty about success, and even the dropping out of the rat race that goes on in the lives of many working women, particularly those well along the trajectory of career success. It is an attempt to explain why so many doctors go into family medicine, why engineers give up high-paying corporate jobs to teach, and even why a growing number of women drop out of their high-powered jobs for something completely different.

"When gifted women decide they'd rather be doctors than physicists, teachers, not engineers, they're opting to study and spend time with people, not things," Dr. Pinker says in her book.

In an interview, she goes even further and says, "I'm not talking about women who want to stay home to bake chocolate chip cookies and homeschool their children." Rather, she says, she is talking about women like the one who wrote a column entitled *My Glass Ceiling is Self Imposed*, who is a high-flying corporate V-P, who could be CEO but says, "Thanks, but no thanks. I am high enough, get enough money, enough pay and still have meaningful contact with my kids, my ageing parents."

Under the traditional model -- which Dr. Pinker calls the *Vanilla Male Model* -- this woman is a failure because she could yet strive higher, get the bigger office and the bigger paycheque. But that is neither her personal model of success, nor the one advocated by Dr. Pinker.

She considers the annual top 500 CEO list, which is typically seen as a prompt for feminist hand-wringing -- women make up 16% of corporate officers of Fortune 500 companies and less than 2% of chief executive jobs in the United States. Among the highest earners, 21% hold extreme jobs requiring 60 to 100 hours a week, and less than a fifth of these are women. But, Dr. Pinker asks provocatively, is that bad or good?

Women are more likely than men to factor in a social or humanitarian purpose to their work -- three-quarters of the Canadian non-profit workforce is female; 90% of the Canadian volunteer workforce is female. "The science of sex differences is clearly a grab bag of surprises," Dr. Pinker says in the book. "Forty years of discounting biology have led us to a strange and discomfiting place, one where women are afraid to own up to their desires, and men ...are seen as standard issue."

The solution, she argues, is to keep an eye on both the science and the history, to recognize sex differences for what they are in the workplace.

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