

Why women don't want top jobs, by a feminist

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When I first became a feminist, back in the 1960s, I thought the male ways of life were the gold standard, the way life was meant to be.

Not men per se - I didn't like the fact they never seemed to see their children and didn't engage with their feelings in the way women did - but it was the way they lived their lives that I envied.

Unlike women, who were tied to the kitchen sink by their apron strings, enmeshed in childcare from sun-up to sun-down without the time or scope to advance their own careers and intellectual pursuits, men were free of all these onerous responsibilities.

They were free to pursue intellectual goals, to work, to succeed, above all to be leaders of the world.

I believed, along with so many others, that women, deep down (or not so deep down), wanted to do all that as well.

We believed we were prevented from doing so only because men, and the sexist world they created, prevented us.

They kept us out of the club because otherwise their power base would be threatened, and if women didn't stay at home with the kids, ready with the supper, slippers and sherry, then their world would be a much poorer place.

I remember writing in early editions of Spare Rib, the magazine I started and which became a central focus of the feminist movement, that it was "only a question of time" before women scaled the ladder of economic success and power and took their place alongside men in the boardroom.

And indeed, as opportunities for women increased, we did start to shine in the classroom.

So much so that, in recent years, education authorities have started to worry that boys are being neglected in favour of girls.

Girls have started to outperform boys at GCSE and A-levels: they get more places in university and better degrees.

In the U.S. between 1969 and 2000, male undergraduates increased by 39 per cent, whereas female ones increased by 157 per cent.

The trend continues beyond education and into the workplace.

In their early 20s, recent reports show, women are actually out-earning men in many instances.

All this proved to me, and to other feminists, that biology in no way dictates your destiny.



Rosie predicted it was 'it was a question of time' before women climbed the ladder

In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says: "One is not born, but rather one becomes, a woman."

I agreed.

We were all born equal: it was only what happened in the nurturing process that decided the differences between men and women.

And we women were all destined to become desperate housewives - desperate to break out of the rigid roles society had accorded us.

But things haven't turned out quite the way I thought they would.

A few years on from those glory days of academic success and professional achievement, women start dropping out of the working rat-race.

They reach middle management levels, then stop climbing.

By their early 30s, most women are earning less than men in almost every sphere of work.

By their mid-30s, with a child or two in tow, they're electing not to return to work, or at least not full-time work.

Many are choosing to set up their own companies, where time management is their own business.

We may have had a female prime minister, but chief executives of FTSE-100 companies are still almost invariably male.

So are women losing their edge, while men find theirs?

Or is on-going discrimination making life for the working woman in modern British society so stressful that she has no option but to turn her back on it?

Until recently, I have always assumed the latter.

Women are pushed out of top jobs when they become mothers by bosses unwilling to provide flexible working hours.

They're pushed out because they can't stay late in the office, because they have to get home to relieve the childminder, because they have to take time off if a child is sick.

But a new book by Canadian academic Susan Pinker, called *The Sexual Paradox*, has forced me to have a rethink - and a radical one at that.

In her intelligent, thoughtful and profoundly important work, Pinker takes us through the facts: tests of 15-year-olds in 30 European countries show girls far outstripping boys in reading, writing and maths.

Girls' early academic achievements have become so markedly better than their male counterparts that a 2006 economics study showed universities practising affirmative action for men.

As a pinker makes clear, it is not a problem with brains or ability that continues to keep women out of the boardroom.

"If you were to predict the future on the basis of school achievement,"

Pinker writes, "the world would be a matriarchy."

And yet, of course, it is not.

Once women move on from school and into careers, men on average will soon overtake them, earning more money and running more shows.

In contrast, women are more likely to leave the workforce, usually to start a family, and to end up with lower pay and less authority if they go back to work.

Pinker is far too shrewd to discount the effects of sex discrimination or culture in affecting women's career choices.

But she thinks these forces play only a small part.

She quotes a female Ivy League law professor as saying: "I am very sceptical of the notion that society discourages talented women from becoming scientists.

"My experience, at least from the educational phase of my life, is that the very opposite is true."

No, if women aren't racing to the upper echelons of science, government and the corporate world despite decades of efforts to woo them, Pinker argues, then it must be because they are wired to resist the demands at the top of those fields.

Women, she says, care more about intrinsic rewards.

They have broader interests, they are more service-oriented and are better at gauging the effect they have on others.

They are "wired for empathy".

Crucially, she explains that these aren't learned traits, forced into them by a sexist society; they're the result of genes and hormones.

Second class: Most FTSE 100 companies have male CEO's

The trends begin in the uterus when men are exposed to higher levels of testosterone, driving them to be more competitive, assertive, vengeful and daring.

Girls, meanwhile, get a regular dose of oestrogen, which helps them read people's emotions.

Then there's prolactin, which, along with oxytocin, surges during pregnancy, breastfeeding and mothering.

Together, these hormones produce a "natural high": tests have shown that female rats experience a greater rush of pleasure from being with their newborns than from cocaine.

What Pinker has done, in fact, is to have proved how and why girls are different from boys right from the womb, when they are pumped full of different hormones.

You can see these differences from very early on - and they cannot be "overridden".

Nature wins over nurture every time.

I've had many feminist friends who have relentlessly presented their tiny daughters with bright-red fire engines to play with, only to be aghast when they throw them aside in favour of a Barbie doll.

The converse is true for boys.

Above all, the hormones women receive in the womb mean that, by nature, they do not want to be manic, one-dimensional workhorses who invest all their energies in one thing: their job (or hobby).

Overall, they are less extreme than men.

The social critic Camille Paglia once wrote: "There is no female Mozart because there is no female Jack the Ripper."

Men are simply more variable - there are more really stupid ones and more very smart ones than women; more extremely lazy ones and more who are willing to halfkill themselves with overwork.

Women, by contrast, are steadier, less risk-taking.

As a consequence, they live longer.

In other words, because of their biological make-up, most women want to limit the amount of time they spend at work and to find "inherent meaning" there, as opposed to domination - a goal which thrills men but leaves most women disenchanting.

As such, women's biological make-up conflicts with making lots of money and rising through the ranks.

These, of course, are the sort of conclusions that used to make my feminist blood boil.

When I set out into the world as a working woman, I believed the quest for equality with men was a quest for the right to have the same life as a man: a full-time job (an obsessive one at that), a fulltime hobby, a partner who really did split the child-care neatly down the middle, plenty of time for "me" to do whatever I wanted.

I didn't think sexual equality could actually mean something completely different - that is, the equality to live your life how you wanted, and to have society respect you equally for it.

The trouble is, of course, that in our money-obsessed society, the jobs and professions we look up to - and that so many envy or seek to emulate - are those that bring in a vast pay cheque (while keeping you chained to your desk).

Our values, Pinker asserts, are based on the simple fact that the world of men (i.e. success and drive) is the correct model.

While society continues primarily to value skills that emphasise money as the only currency of success, the skills that women have will always be seen as second-rate - and women will be seen to be failing.

The tragedy is that it is women who end up paying the price for this misunderstanding.

Too many of us struggle on in jobs we do not like, simply because the fiscal rewards are seen as the marker of achievement.

I realise, of course, that there is a danger here of over-simplifying the debate: affording a home often requires two full-time incomes.

Yet, it is equally undeniable that all of the women whom Pinker spoke to who had decided to step off the career ladder - whether to devote more time to their children or to develop their own businesses - report far greater degrees of satisfaction.

What we need to do, she asserts, is to stop rating women according to men and accept that the sexes truly are different.

As I see it, this is both a relief and a sadness.

A relief because it explains the female drain from the workforce when women are in their 30s; a sadness because too often those women are seen to have failed.

To make men and women genuinely equal, we have to accept and honour difference, not mark everyone's scorecard according to the same set of standards.

I still firmly believe there are measures that Britain could and should take to make the workplace more female-friendly, or rather more family-friendly.

For most working mums I know, it's attempting to juggle their boss's demands with their children's needs (combined with most men's continued reluctance to shoulder an equal share of running a home) that makes their lives so stressful.

There is still no escaping the fact that, as a society, Britain lags far behind the rest of Europe in providing good, reliable childcare, which covers school holidays as well as those tricky hours between the end of the school day and the time that most offices close.

But I also believe that Pinker's book should mark a watershed.

Sexual equality is all very well.

But real equality comes from making your own choices, not just following the well-trodden path towards careerism, simply because it has been signposted by society as the only path to success.

Liberation must always be about being yourself, not simply a clone.

The battle of the sexes is over.

Let the fight for women to be women commence.