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The Glass-Ceiling

By Graciela Chichilnisky

February 07, 2005

The role of women in academia has recently been propelled onto the national scene by the comments of Lawrence Summers, the president of Harvard, who told a conference that the different genetic makeup of men and women may explain the relative dearth of women in the upper ranks of science and mathematics. Men, he said, may be better genetically endowed for mathematics and, therefore, for the sciences.

I do not want to focus on Dr. Summers' comments nor on the furor that they have created, which many are doing. Rather, I want to share with you the more human side that underlies this academic debate about the causes of gender inequity in our universities. In doing so, I take a leaf from the recent article in The New York Times by Cornelia Dean, the newspaper's science editor from 1999 to 2003. There, Dean documents the personal insults and degradation that drove her away from a science career for which she showed the highest talent, shifting instead to journalism.

I will use my own experience in academia to illustrate the same point. That is, before one worries about the hypothetical and as yet unproven differences in genetic makeup between men and women, which certainly may exist, one needs to address the gender inequities in opportunity that we know exist and the enormous impact that they have on individuals and their families who have suffered under the current rules of the game.

While I am involved in litigation against Columbia on gender discrimination and related issues—for more information see www.sexandtheivyleague.com—my goal here is not to argue my personal case. Rather, I am writing this article with the hope that in some small way it will help us all get to a better state together where equality of opportunity is the norm and everyone is treated with respect. Our nation needs all the well-trained, dedicated scientists and mathematicians it can get to compete in the global marketplace, and it needs to limit the outsourcing of jobs that occurs mostly in the technology sector.

It makes no sense to compete with our hands tied behind our back, as we deny access to science and mathematics to more than 50 percent of the population because of outdated attitudes, no matter how interested one may be in addressing the academic questions posed by Dr. Summers. If 100 men score seven in mathematics, while 20 women score 10 and 80 score five, then the average woman scores six, less than the average male. Yet if Harvard and Columbia are looking for 15 faculty members, under these circumstances, all 15 should be women, if the University really wants the best. When looking for the top ranks in academia, one does not deal in averages.

Attitudes matter. When I was the only graduate student in my class at MIT who solved the A+ question in the mathematics exam, almost by magic I lost all my male friends and no one

again asked me for a date. My mother predicted that I would never get married because I was pursuing two Ph.Ds, in mathematics and economics. After I completed each of my dissertations, there were rumors that someone else had written them, rumors that were put to rest by the very same men to whom my work was attributed—two wonderful mathematicians, Jerry Marsden and Morris Hirsch at UC Berkeley. In both cases, my career suffered a setback, however temporary. Many years later, a former senior administrator at Columbia asked me why I should worry about my salary when, as an attractive woman, I could get married instead.

My experience is not a thing of the past, though. My daughter suffered the same fate two years ago in high school when the boys said “since she knew all the answers, she should teach the mathematics class herself rather than the professor,” leaving her wondering whether there was something wrong in knowing all the answers. Paradoxically, she was told by family and friends that “she was not good at mathematics” and should study English or history instead---until this year, when she became a semifinalist in a National Merit Scholarship after getting an 800 in her 2004 PSAT mathematics exams. In reality, the choice between careers and family can be excruciating and cruel for the many younger faculty women who are concerned with getting tenure and desire to have children.

In January 2001, MIT’s President Charles Vest publicly disclosed a dirty secret in the Ivy League—that the top nine universities in the U.S. found evidence of gender discrimination in their institutions against women faculty that required correction, and that these discriminatory attitudes resulted in marginalization of women faculty and hostility in the halls of academia, which led to lower salaries for women, unfair promotion processes, marginalization, sabotage of their work and research grants and even physical damage to their labs and their research. It was an eye opener to me when I read about the MIT study, because the same list of problems that it describes were problems that I myself have experienced firsthand.

The ‘glass ceiling’ means that, as documented in the MIT study, it gets worse at the top. The list of universities involved in the 2001 MIT study also included Harvard, Yale, University of Pennsylvania, Stanford, Princeton, University of Michigan, University of California, and the California Institute of Technology. The nine universities signed a declaration committing themselves to remedy the situation. Our own University President Lee Bollinger, at Michigan at the time, signed this public declaration. However, Columbia does not belong to the group of nine universities, and it officially denies that there is any discrimination against women faculty.

While the pervasive nature of gender inequity is clear, many people point to the growing number of women in science classrooms and entering ranks of our universities as a sign that the problem will be solved in time. They can even point to me as an example of someone who has made it, though in doing so, they will be ignorant of the pain my family and I have experienced as a result of my butting up against the glass ceiling. And the higher it gets, the worse it is. Many who know me ask me why I do not just do the work I love, which my tenure supposedly allows me to do, instead of exposing myself to the painful experiences that result from my seeking equity. My answer is always the same. The situation is intolerable to the point that many talented and powerful women have given up science and mathematics because of the inequity and hostile treatment, as documented by the MIT study.

But there is an even more powerful reason. My case is important to help make the lives of those growing women students and entering faculty less painful. We need to change the attitudes that led Larry Summers to question why there aren’t more women at the top in

mathematics and science. The glass ceiling must be overcome for this attitude to change.

This is not a win-or-lose situation. We will all be better off when academia serves as a model of equity and enables all students and faculty to pursue their passions. I would be remiss if I did not end by imploring the current administration and my faculty colleagues to come together to take steps now to ensure that the growing number of women science students and entering faculty can experience the joy of fulfilling their dreams and aspirations. Columbia can become a national leader in the movement toward this universally accepted goal. It is difficult, but it is worth it.

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