

Gender Equality

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Introduction

Of course I'm for gender equality. But what does that mean? At a minimum, it means that males and females and all other genders must be equal under the law. It also has to mean that all genders have equal opportunities to education and employment. It has to mean equal pay for equal work. But I still have some questions.

Standard University (I am making this up) wanted to make sure it was admitting students in a way that's fair to males and females. So SU told its two departments, A and B, that the proportion of male and female acceptances must be the same as the proportion of male and female applicants. Department A had 100 male and 100 female applicants. It could accept only 100 new students, so it accepted 50 males and 50 females; it accepted 50% of the male applicants, and 50% of the female applicants, fulfilling its obligation. Department B had 100 male and 900 female applicants. It could accept only 100 new students, so it accepted 10 males and 90 females; it accepted 10% of the male applicants, and 10% of the female applicants, fulfilling its obligation. That means that SU had 200 male and 1000 female applicants, and it accepted 60 males and 140 females; it accepted 30% of the male applicants, but only 14% of the female applicants, which is unfair. Where did they go wrong? They didn't do anything wrong. There is no way to accept students that's fair to all of SU and Department A and Department B. No matter what SU does, it will be accused of gender unfairness.

Many years ago, my university, the University of Toronto, became quite concerned about the gender imbalance in some of its departments. My department, computer science, was one of the culprits: we were 80% male. So my department sent an email to all its members asking for suggestions on how to improve the balance. One of my colleagues made a fatal error: he replied to all, wondering whether males and females want to take computer science in equal numbers, or whether males prefer computer science and females prefer other subjects. The outcry from feminists was deafening; it made the national news. My colleague's career never recovered. He stopped going to departmental seminars and meetings. He was never assigned female graduate students after that.

I made an error too, but mine was not fatal. I was my department's representative on the Faculty Association, and in a meeting we discussed gender imbalance. It was stated that the imbalance is worst in engineering, mathematics, and some sciences (STEM), and we should tackle the problem first where it is worst. I said that actually the worst imbalance was in nursing, so perhaps we should start there. Some people laughed; they thought I was making a joke. Others just dismissed my comment. Since my comment was verbal, not in writing, and in a closed meeting, it did not escape the room and ruin my career. But there was a point to my comment. Maybe the culture within the nursing department discourages men who would like to be nurses; to the extent that's the problem, we should fix it. Or maybe men just don't want to be nurses as often as women do; to the extent that's true, there's no problem to fix. Likewise for STEM departments, but reversing the genders.

The university's discussions on gender equality did a lot of good. They identified cultural obstacles against women in STEM departments, and these departments began to eliminate these obstacles, and the gender balance has improved, though it is still a distance from half and half. Cultural obstacles against men in nursing still exist, and the balance there is still far from equal. We still don't know to what extent the imbalances are due to culture (societal and departmental), and to what extent they are just a natural difference between men and women. It seems that question is still taboo.

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