Gender and Publishing

The article “Why Don't Women Publish as Much as Men?” noted that men generally exceed women in scholarly output and suggested a number of possible causes. Let me provide a somewhat different perspective.

The differences seen in scholarly output are probably in major part a reflection of temperamental differences between men and women that have an origin in our evolutionary past. As described in my soon-to-be-released book, Divided Labours: An Evolutionary View of Women at Work, men tend, on average, to be more oriented toward status and risk taking than women because, across the centuries, high-status men have been able to garner a disproportionate share of mates, thereby passing on these traits to their sons. These sex differences are mediated by hormones acting both in utero and later in life.

Status in the academic world is largely determined by both the quantity and quality of publications. Women generally devote less energy to climbing status hierarchies and, thus, may be willing (or even eager) to engage in more activities that do not lead to the attainment of status. The suggestion that women may spend more time on their teaching may be true, but quantity and quality of teaching, even if important to the home institution, are not generally significant contributors to status within the field. Most studies of productivity, both inside and outside the academy, find that men devote more hours to work than women do, whether or not there are children in the household.

It is suggested that women tend to invest more time in a particular project, “rechecking their facts and reworking the writing.” This tendency is attributed to the difficulty of being accepted as “one of the boys” and the importance of not failing. Implicit in this argument is that women’s work will be more closely scrutinized than men’s. Even if that explanation is correct, and I’m not sure that it is, it does not tell the whole story. Women generally are more risk-averse than men, whether in terms of physical risk or career risk. Publishing articles (like publishing this letter) involves risk. One puts one’s ideas out for people to criticize and attack. A risk-averse individual will be more hesitant to publish and perhaps less productive for that reason. ...

The publishing gap is in large part due to the same causes as the much-decried glass ceiling and gender gap in compensation. On average, men and women may get different psychic rewards from workplace investment, which causes them to have somewhat different orientations toward their work.

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