



## Do We Still Need a Women in Cell Biology Committee?

When my son went through adolescence, he passed, as will be familiar to most parents, from the smart-ass stage to the more sophisticated smart-ass stage. It was at this point that he took to modifying his answer to, “What does your mother do?” His reply:

“She is Executive Director of the American Society for Women in Cell Biology.”

When I protested, he would grab the nearest copy of the *ASCB Newsletter* — never very far in our house — open it at random, and start pointing. “See? See? Women presidents. Women awardees. Women committee chairs. What about Men in Cell Biology? Is there room for them at the ASCB?”

My, my how far we have come.

How great is it to have finally achieved a post-feminist, gender-neutral society, one in which today’s teens, 20-somethings and even 30-somethings do not see gender discrimination? In this environment it’s perfectly reasonable to question why there would be a committee devoted to half of a professional society; indeed why a professional society would devote any resources to promoting part of its membership. In fact, it is well established that girls are not underrepresented in the biological sciences, and even young women are not underrepresented through the doctoral level.

But those who don’t know history are doomed to repeat it. Overt gender discrimination may be much less prevalent in the U.S. sciences than a generation ago. And one can certainly point to wildly successful women scientists in our

country. But we are still not satisfactorily addressing the pressure that results where career and parenthood intersect. Thus, it is in the higher ranks of science that women fall out, and the higher the rank, the more they

fall out. Of course there are examples of men who carry their disproportionate share of child-rearing, who give up or significantly compromise their career to devote more of themselves to their children, and who become less productive when they become parents because of their new priorities. But these men do not begin to approach the number of women who do so.

It is also important to

note that the disadvantage (this may be a more nuanced and accurate descriptor than ‘discrimination’) women suffer in this regard

is passive, not active; that is, not intentional nor malicious, but rather subtle, often unconscious and thereby insidious. It’s all downhill from there.

In this regard, the challenges faced by women and by underrepresented minorities in science have something in common, but the commonality largely ends there. Despite the tendency to lump together “women and minorities,” the unfair obstacles faced by underrepresented minorities in science are harsher than those faced by women because they are rooted in a legacy of systematic discrimination resulting, among other things, in unequal access to education

from a young age. A woman’s disadvantage is at least rooted in something positive: motherhood. But this may contribute to making arguments

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for the fair treatment of women hard to sell, because it's not readily obvious that they suffer any disadvantage at all.

Of course there is a certain cyclicity to all social issues. Accumulating injustices or sudden incidents can erupt into a popular movement that results in significant social change. These have included civil rights, anti-war campaigns and environmental activism. The changes that such movements produce are welcome, but they almost inevitably are followed by a counter-productive vacuum or even backlash: the next generation, having never suffered nor personally witnessed the suffering of others due to these injustices, becomes complacent or sees more pressing needs. Opposing interests start to take hold, and injustices sneak back in.

So do we still need a Women in Cell Biology Committee? Just because your house is not burning doesn't mean you should close down the fire department. When the representation of women at the highest ranks of science is equal to the representation of men at the highest ranks of science, I will be the first to rip the stakes from the ground and fold up the tent. In the meantime, perhaps my son may wish to petition the Society to establish a Men in Cell Biology Committee. This committee could devote itself to supporting men as they tackle the very serious challenges of raising children while advancing their scientific career. ■

—Elizabeth Marincola



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