



Heather Mac Donald

Math Is Harder for Girls

. . . and also, it seems, for the New York Times.

28 July 2008

The *New York Times* is determined to show that women are discriminated against in the sciences; too bad the facts say otherwise. A new study has “found that girls perform as well as boys on standardized math tests,” claims a July 25 [article](#) by Tamar Lewin—thus, the underrepresentation of women on science faculties must result from bias. Actually, the study, summarized in the July 25 issue of *Science*, shows something quite different: while boys’ and girls’ *average* scores are similar, boys outnumber girls among students in both the highest and the lowest score ranges. Either the *Times* is deliberately concealing the results of the study or its reporter cannot understand the most basic science reporting.

Lewin begins her piece with the mandatory mocking reference to former Harvard president Lawrence Summers’ suicidal speculations about why women are underrepresented on science and math faculties. She also manages to squeeze in a classic feminist trope for how our sexist society destroys girls’ innate abilities, invoking the infamous “talking Barbie doll [who] proclaimed that ‘math class is tough.’” Lewin implies that the new study blows Summers’ wide-ranging speculations on gender and math out of the water; all that holds women back from equal representation in MIT’s physics department, it seems, is Mattel and other patriarchal marketers of gender myths.

On the contrary, *Science*’s analysis of math test scores only confirms the hypothesis that cost Summers his Harvard post: that boys are found more often than girls at the outer reaches of the bell curve of abstract reasoning ability. If you’re hoping to land a job in Harvard’s math department, you’d better not show up with average math scores; in fact, you’d better present scores at the absolute top of the range. And as studies have shown for decades, there are many more boys than girls in that empyrean realm. Unless science and math faculties start practicing the most grotesque and counterproductive gender discrimination, a skew in the sex of their professors will be inevitable, given the distribution of top-level cognitive skills. Likewise, boys will be and are overrepresented among math dunces—though the feminists never complain about the male math failure rate.

Lewin claims that the “researchers looked at the average of the test scores of all students, the performance of the most gifted children and the ability to solve complex math problems. They found, in every category, that girls did as well as boys.” This statement is simply wrong. Among white 11th-graders, there were twice as many boys as girls above the 99th percentile—that is, at the very top of the curve. (Asians, however, showed a very slight skew toward females above the 99th percentile, while there were too few Hispanics and blacks scoring above even the 95th percentile to compute their gender ratios.)

The *Science* researchers themselves try to downplay the significance of the two-to-one ratio for whites—the vast majority of students—on the grounds that it should produce a 67 percent to 33 percent disparity in male-to-female representation in math-dependent fields. Yet Ph.D. programs for engineering, they say, contain only about 15 percent women. Therefore, the authors conclude, “gender differences in math performance, even among high scorers, are insufficient to explain lopsided gender patterns in participation in some [science and math] fields.”

This reasoning is flawed, however, because the tests used in their study are pathetically easy compared with what would be required of engineering or other rigorous math-based Ph.D.s. The researchers got their data from math tests devised by individual states to fulfill their annual testing obligations under the federal No Child Left Behind

act. NCLB has produced a mad rush to the bottom, as many states crafted easier and easier reading and math tests to show their federal overseers how well their schools are doing. The *Science* researchers analyzed the difficulty of those tests and found that virtually none required remotely complicated problem-solving abilities. That a gender difference at the highest percentiles shows up on tests pitched to such an elementary level of knowledge and skill suggests that on truly challenging tests, the gender difference at the top end of the distribution will be even greater. Indeed, between five and ten times as many boys as girls have been found to receive near-perfect scores on the math SATs among mathematically gifted adolescents, for example. Far from raising the presumption of gender bias among schools and colleges, the *Science* study strengthens a competing hypothesis: that the main drivers of success in scientific fields are aptitude and knowledge, in conjunction with personal choices about career and family that feminists refuse to acknowledge.

The same reality-denying feminists are itching to subject college science and math departments to gender quotas. They have already persuaded Congress to require university scientists to perform [Title IX](#) compliance reviews—a nightmare of bean-counting paperwork—covering everything from faculty composition to lab space. Misleading reporting like Lewin’s will only strengthen the movement to select cancer researchers and atomic engineers on the basis of their sex, not their abilities.

The *Wall Street Journal*, it should be noted, had no difficulty grasping the two main findings of the *Science* study: that “girls and boys have roughly the same average scores on state math tests,” as Keith J. Winstein reported on July 25, but that “boys more often excelled or failed.” That the *New York Times*, in an article over twice as long as the *Journal*’s, couldn’t manage to squeeze in a reference to the fact that boys outperformed girls at the top end of the curve should put its readers on notice: trust nothing you read here.

Heather Mac Donald is a contributing editor of City Journal and the John M. Olin Fellow at the Manhattan Institute. Her latest book, coauthored with Victor Davis Hanson and Steven Malanga, is [The Immigration Solution](#).