

The Sexual Paradox

Review by Tony Little

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The Sexual Paradox: Troubled Boys, Gifted Girls and the Real Difference Between the Sexes

By Susan Pinker

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At last, common sense. Three decades of working in schools, both co-educational and single sex, have shown me clearly that boys and girls learn in contrasting ways: the hard-wiring of male and female is different. Yet this statement of the blindingly obvious has been viewed as a disruptive heresy. The prevailing orthodoxy has it that gender is culturally defined, that boys and girls behave differently because we expect them to. In *The Sexual Paradox*, Susan Pinker gives a well-argued, scientifically based riposte.

Where Leonard Sax's remarkable study *Why Gender Matters* (2005) stated a strong case for a new look at teaching methods based on an understanding of sex differences, Pinker goes further. She sets out to explore what men and women want and why they want it. This is a well-trodden path in itself, but her approach is original. She writes with balance, capturing nuances of behaviour. Her scholarship is based on extensive research but she also acknowledges the sometimes tenuous link between research and experience, and accepts that group averages say little about any single, real person. As both a developmental psychologist and newspaper columnist, she complements the science with telling anecdote and case study.

Tackling issues from career progression to criminality, she achieves focus through the unlikely prism of fragile men and gifted women. The male, it seems, is a fragile creature, more likely to suffer from educational problems and chronic illness. Yet a male exhibiting "extreme" features of maleness – such as one with marked Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) who drops out of education – can be stunningly successful. In a typical conceit, a comparison is made to Superman and Kryptonite: ADHD can be a man's undoing. Yet, in the right circumstances, it can give him special powers.

A study of gifted women in "extreme" jobs reveals further paradoxes. The default assumption that the female is just a variation of the male is disproved by brain imaging and neuroendocrinology, as well as by practical observation. And talented women who step into positions defined by male ambitions frequently reject that picture of success. A survey of high-achieving lawyers in the US, for example, showed that a disproportionately higher number of women than men dropped out for no ostensible reason.

By examining the "biologically rigged extremes", Pinker argues we can see some of the tendencies reflected in the middle ranges. Recognising sex differences is fundamental to helping boys with problems such as ADHD learn (Pinker describes one innovative teacher whose five-year-old boys were spinning on one leg while learning). It will also help girls identify the lives and careers they want. It is the only way to understand the paradoxical motivations and choices of men and women later on.

This highly readable book on a familiar theme succeeds where others do not, with its potent combination of scientific research, interviews and astute observation. It is a large contribution to an important debate.

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