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# A Feminist Biologist Discusses Gender Differences In The Animal Kingdom



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*What do feminists think of distinct gender roles in other species, for example, in chickens? originally appeared on [Quora](#): the place to gain and share knowledge, empowering people to learn from others and better understand the world.*

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### **Answer by Suzanne Sadedin, Evolutionary Biologist, on Quora:**

What do feminists think of distinct gender roles in other species? I think this is a perfectly reasonable question, and it's something I've spent a good part of my career mulling over. In basically all animal species, males and females *do* tend to behave in distinct ways, and these distinctions are largely presumed to be biologically hardwired rather than resulting from acculturation — a presumption that is itself fairly safe because *most* animals don't have complex cultures.

So, from the perspective of biology, it would be very surprising if human males and females did not have distinct, hardwired behavioral tendencies. As someone who is both a biologist and (I like to think) a feminist, this puts me at odds with much of traditional feminist theory.

And from that perspective it is, indeed, kind of scary: if men and women are naturally different, can we ever really understand each other? Is the aspiration for equality doomed? Are stereotypes true, and if so, how can we tell people not to use them? These fears underlie both the old-fashioned denial of innate gender differences and the more recent wave of trans-exclusive radical feminism. Both tend to dismiss conflicting evidence from biology and anthropology as expressions of confirmation bias from the patriarchy. Which might be reasonable if the idea that gender is really a blank slate were biologically plausible, *but it's not*. [1]

Fortunately, there are researchers who instead of retreating into ivory (or glass) towers, study the evidence. And what this tells us about human gender differences is interesting. When it's presented to the public, that

evidence mostly gets co-opted into ideological cannon fodder. Sometimes the interpretation is feminist, sometimes it's misogynistic, but **the data are neither**.

Here's *my understanding* of what the *currently available* data say about human sex differences\*:

- Men and women are very similar neurologically, and the distributions of gender-correlated traits fall on a continuum; hardly anyone has a purely male-like or purely female-like brain [2]. Some brain areas are a bit larger in men, some in women. Overall brain size is larger in men, but in similar proportion to body size [3].
- There are no consistent gender differences in average IQ, though male variance is higher [4]. Sex-specific differences in certain abilities tend to show up in studies [5], but can often be eliminated by avoiding certain biasing cues [6].
- Normal adult humans of all genders can understand and identify with people of other genders using *theory of mind*. Women are a bit better at this on average [7]. Males dominate most competitive areas. This is probably due to two factors we can't readily disentangle: (a) wider *variance* in ability, which means that even if the average is the same for men and women, the absolute best individual at a given task is more likely to be male [8] and (b) intransigent cultural factors. Females more often choose lower-paid careers. And females tend to compete well (often better than men) until childbearing and then fall behind or drop out [9].
- The neurological similarity of human males and females is a recently-evolved feature. Our brains are much less gender-distinct than the brains of our near relatives, chimpanzees and gorillas. However, in more distantly-related apes, monogamy and similar sexes also occur [10].

- Human males engage in much more substantial nurturing behavior toward the young than any of our near relatives [11].
- Men are responsible for an overwhelming proportion of serious violent crime [12]. They are also overwhelmingly responsible for the dangerous, exhausting, and unpleasant physical work that confers little money and less status [13].
- Humans are much more socially monogamous [14] and egalitarian than any surviving near relative; but not perfectly either [15]. Across species, these features go along with greatly reduced sex differences (in monogamous birds, the sexes are often practically identical). And we are, indeed, much less sexually dimorphic than our near relatives [16].
- The term patriarchy, as used by contemporary feminists, often seems kind of meaningless. I think when we talk about patriarchy, what we're really getting at is the re-emergence of social hierarchies that resulted from sedentary farming starting around ten thousand years ago. Individuals in sedentary communities were better able to control and monopolize resources, including women. This led to greater specialization, technological innovation, and social inequality [15].
- In patriarchal societies, elite males are able to support and protect multiple mates, enabling a renewal of polygyny; an underclass of unmated, low-status males make useful slaves and cannon fodder [e.g. 17]. Low-status males are duped into accepting their fate via manipulative social norms. Being treated as property is bad for women, but at least they are generally a valued resource in patriarchal societies; low-status men have it worse.
- Whilst social monogamy is the most common mating pattern, human males and females enjoy diverse short and long term mating strategies [18]. Males *are* slightly more promiscuously inclined on average, which results in a demand/supply imbalance that is commonly corrected through material exchange. Since

humans are naturally fairly socially monogamous, none of this is a threat to the social order, and the main effect of stigmatizing *any* sexual behavior is that people fail to learn safe ways to express their sexuality [19].

- *Fairness* is a central social norm in all human societies, presumably deriving from our egalitarian heritage; what is considered *fair* varies [20], and can be co-opted in modern hierarchical societies to enforce social inequality. (If I have ten oranges and you have none, is that fair? Inherently, no. But what if the gods/the king/my father gave them to me? Then maybe...)
- Diversity in decision-making roles leads to better decisions for groups, organizations and societies [21].
- Power corrupts. Sometimes slow, sometimes fast [22]. But as a general rule, there's no such thing as a benign ruler; so long as gender-based power inequalities persist, so will gender-based disadvantage.

**To me all of this suggests the following conclusions and directions for feminist thought:**

- Our species is unique among great apes in being adapted for egalitarian societies with substantial paternal care, diverse mating behavior dominated by social monogamy, and only minor cognitive sex differences.
- Egalitarianism can and should extend to both sexes under the universal social norm of fairness. This implies that where one sex is biologically disadvantaged, for example females in childbirth (or males in reproductive control), societies should actively work to counteract power inequalities that flow from this disadvantage.
- Increased gender equality benefits society through better decision-making and a reduction in violence, as well as increasing overall productivity and quality of life in countless ways.

- Patriarchy (as defined above) doesn't just hurt women by treating them as property. In fact, the worst victims of patriarchy are the low-status, unmarriageable men who do the most dirty, dangerous jobs in society for peanuts. Unfortunately, we've done a terrible job at understanding and communicating this, to the point that most men in this situation are convinced that feminism, not patriarchy, is actually the root of their problems. So long as middle-class feminists ridicule and demonize them while enjoying relatively pampered lives, these men will continue to hate us. And who can blame them?
- Stereotyping aggravates and perpetuates oppression whether it is statistically accurate or not. Every human deserves the respect of being approached as an individual, not as a representative of their gender.

**Acknowledging biological elements in gender diversity in no way conflicts with the feminist goal of liberating people from fixed gender roles and power inequalities. It might, however, reveal more effective ways to achieve this goal.**

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\*There's a huge and often conflicting, sensationalist literature on many of these issues, so without writing a formal academic review, it's difficult to give a balanced reference list. As far as I'm aware, these articles do represent the current scientific consensus with reasonable accuracy, but in such a politically charged area, science is not immune to bias.

[1] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc...>

[2] [The brains of men and women aren't really that different, study finds](#)

[3] [Sex differences in human physiology - Wikipedia](#)

[4] [Sex differences in intelligence - Wikipedia](#)

[5] [Sex Differences in Cognitive Abilities - Diane Halpern](#)

- [6] <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/vie...>
- [7] Gender differences in cognitive Theory of Mind revealed by transcranial direct current stimulation on medial prefrontal cortex
- [8] Gender differences in variability and extreme scores in an international context
- [9] <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/...>
- [10] Understanding Sex Differences in Humans: What do we learn from nature?
- [11] <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~valegg...>
- [12] Sex differences in crime - Wikipedia
- [13] Danger zone: Men, masculinity and occupational health and safety in high risk occupations
- [14] Monogamy and Human Evolution
- [15] Is the struggle for equality a fight against nature? – Dylan Evans | Aeon Essays
- [16] Sexual Body Size Dimorphism
- [17] Violence: Of men and mayhem | The Economist
- [18] Is the Human Species Sexually Omnivorous?
- [19] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc...>
- [20] Fairness Norms and Theory of Mind in an Ultimatum Game: Judgments, Offers, and Decisions in School-Aged Children
- [21] The Data on Diversity
- [22] Power can corrupt even the honest

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