

Webinar N°3 - The neurobiological differences between men and women

within the SCNAT webinar series Achieving Gender Equality and Diversity in the Natural Sciences, held in 2021



Summary of inputs and conclusions

by Romaine Jean

Last week we have heard that gender is socially and culturally constructed or influenced. But there are biological differences between men and women which it would be non-scientific to disregard.

According to Larry Cahill, professor and neuroscientist at the University of California, Irvine, USA, we must understand, rather than deny sex differences, since denying them harms women. "We can be 100% confident that the human brain contains all manner of sex influences at all levels of its function, down to the genetic foundation". Why the resistance, why the deep belief even in neuroscience that fundamental sex differences outside reproduction do not exist, asks Larry Cahill. "Because the politics are driven by the false belief that "equal" means "the same" neurobiologically. The immediate task for neuroscientists at all levels of our field should be to challenge the assumption that sex matters little, if at all. Obviously, ignoring significant influences of sex, should they exist, can only retard progress, says Larry Cahill. If we want to increase gender diversity, we need to stop expecting women to be like men.

For Jill Becker, chair in biopsychology at the University of Michigan, USA, sex differences are to be embraced and not ignored. "This is not neurosexism". For instance, women are more vulnerable to addiction and tend to escalate and use more rapidly drugs to the point of addiction than men. This is true for alcohol and most illicit drugs. Time from first exposure to drug to chronic drug use is shorter for women than for men.

What conclusion can one draw from these findings for gender equality in careers? Can this neurological difference between the sexes explain for instance why women are less present in leading positions? Not at all, explains Jill Becker. Sexual harassment is present in the laboratory, in the classroom and in the academy, and it must stop - from trivializing the study of females to microaggressions to sexual misconduct - it is not acceptable in any form. For Jill Becker, sex differences are a type of diversity. Women need to be supported for bringing different perspectives and approaches to the academy.

Watch the webinar on youtube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrvpXIQVA9c>

Website of webinar series

https://biol.scnat.ch/de/activities/uuid/i/d87a53d7-bac7-522f-957c-12f0d9ebc843-Achieving_Gender_Equality_and_Diversity_in_the_Natural_Sciences