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In the Humanities, Men Dominate the Fields of Philosophy and History

By Katherine Mangan



Kelvin Ma for The Chronicle

Sally Haslanger, a philosophy professor at MIT, says women are held back by a lack of good mentoring and put off by "cold and alienating environments" in many philosophy departments.

The underrepresentation of women in science and mathematics is well documented, but it may come as a surprise to many people that men also far outnumber women in certain humanities disciplines, including philosophy and history.

Last year women received just 29 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded in philosophy, and 41 percent of those in history, according to statistics from the U.S. Education Department. (The figures in the 2009-10 chart on Page B6 combine religion and philosophy and show a higher representation among women.)

The faculty ranks showed similar tilts, with men outnumbering women at all levels across both disciplines.

Last year in philosophy, women made up 21 percent of faculty members and just under 17 percent of full professors, according to the American Philosophical Association.

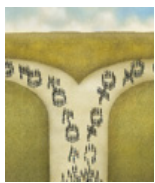
Regan Penaluna, an assistant professor of philosophy at St. John's University, in New York, says women are turned off by the canon of philosophy, which she says is heavily weighted toward men and at times even hostile to women.

Other people counter that the same could be said for other disciplines, like English, that nonetheless attract far more women than men.

Feminist philosophers have come up with their own ratings system—the Pluralist's Guide.Org—to assess which programs are most supportive of women and minority scholars.

The ratings system provoked a backlash last year from female graduate students at Rutgers University, one of the institutions whose environment "needs improvement," according to the guide. In a lengthy defense of their department, the students said their views are taken seriously, they are supported by faculty, and they in turn are role models for undergraduate women.

"While it is true that feminist philosophy is not well represented here, we do not think that in order for a philosophy department to be a good department for women it must be a good department for feminist philosophy," the students wrote in a response on the guide's Web site.



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Changes in the way philosophy is taught may be alienating some women, says Brian R. Leiter, a professor of jurisprudence at the University of Chicago who blogs about both philosophy and law programs and puts out a widely read ranking of graduate programs, the Philosophical Gourmet Report.

"Philosophy, in the English-speaking world, has migrated closer to the sciences, and places a high premium on technical skills, logic, and dividing problems into lots of small pieces," Mr. Leiter says.

And while many science and mathematics disciplines have been working to attract women, "philosophy hasn't been particularly self-conscious in developing measures to counteract the problem," he says.

Sally Haslanger, a professor of philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says the factors that may hold women back include "implicit associations linking philosophy with masculinity, both in the minds of instructors and students," not enough good mentoring, and "cold and alienating environments" in many philosophy departments.

History is also struggling with a gender imbalance. In 2010, women made up just under 40 percent of faculty members in that discipline, according to the American Historical Association's latest

survey. And with women representing just 41 percent of undergraduate majors, "the problem seems to start at the beginning of the pipeline," says Robert B. Townsend, deputy director of the association.

Many women opt for interdisciplinary majors like environmental or women's studies, which have components of history. And when they do go on to receive graduate degrees in history, women often eschew university life to become "public historians," applying history to real-world issues in jobs like archivists and government historians. About twice as many women take that path as stay in academe, Mr. Townsend says.


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Hank Walker 1 hour ago

One factor that is not discussed in the article is that at least in the South, a large fraction of middle/high school history teachers are football coaches. That skews the gender distribution of history majors.

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