

How different are women and men?

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Books Reviewed:

The Better Half: On the Genetic Superiority of Women by Sharon Moalem
(Penguin, April 2020)

The Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience that Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain by Gina Rippon (The Bodley Head, February 2019)

Gender Mosaic: Beyond the Myth of the Male and Female Brain by Daphna Joel and Luba Vikhanski (Hachette, September 2019)

Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality by Anne Fausto-Sterling (Basic Books, June 2020)



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The last couple of years have seen a trend in more feminist literature from trade publishers. Popular science writing has been no exception, with authors seeking to investigate and debunk perceived biological differences between men and women. They are welcome additions to a field that has been plagued historically by sexist assumptions with little basis in biology, such as the notion that women are less intelligent than men. My own contribution, *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong and the New Research that's Rewriting the Story*, came out in 2017. I've since been following new works exploring similar themes, mapping how they contribute to feminist thought.

The latest addition to my book pile has been *The Better Half* by US geneticist Sharon Moalem, who claims that women are genetically superior to men owing to the presence of an extra X sex chromosome in

their DNA. Stretching what scientists know about the genetics of sex difference to the point of speculation, Moalem argues that women are by birth mentally and physically stronger than men – for instance, in immune response and longevity – although he fails to explain why societies then tend to be male dominated. Ostensibly a book about female power, Moalem nevertheless takes us back to the old trope that men and women are almost different breeds.

In her 2019 book *The Gendered Brain*, British neuroscientist Gina Rippon soberly explains that women and men are in fact not as different as we might imagine, particularly in how we think. Her theory, reiterated in the more recent and equally fascinating *Gender Mosaic* by Israeli neuroscientist Daphna Joel and science writer Luba Vikhanski is that human brains are remarkably plastic, and shaped by our experiences. If these experiences are heavily gendered, our brains will reflect this, in the same way that the brains of working black cab drivers have larger regions associated with memory.

Joel and Vikhanski argue that almost all of us are mosaics of what we think of as masculine and feminine traits. When some of us struggle against the gendered straitjackets of society, this may be a symptom of the fact that we fail to recognise the multiplicity of qualities that can exist within one person. Joel advocates abandoning gender altogether and recognising each person as unique.

But viewing people as individuals rather than as categories, an important part of moving towards a society that might finally treat people equally, isn't where we seem to be headed. Instead, we remain as obsessed with looking for biological sex differences as scientists were in the previous century. We need only to have watched the news coverage of the Covid-19 crisis, which repeatedly highlighted the fact that women were on

average less likely to die than men, to see how deep our obsession goes. Moalem's book is to some degree also a product of that obsession.

The struggle between modern-day writers on the science of sex, then, is how to negotiate the differences and similarities between women and men. This is an old debate, in some ways replaying Western feminist arguments of the late nineteenth century: Should women have equal power, opportunities and status because they are the same as men, or because they bring something qualitatively different to the table, unique qualities that men don't have? Feminists sit on both sides of this divide, even now.

The truth about sex differences is that nothing is clear cut. While there are of course average differences between men and women – for example, in height and upper body strength – there is also considerable overlap on pretty much all traits, except reproductive functions. Some women are strong enough to make brilliant weightlifters and soldiers, and many men are not. Psychologically, the gaps between the sexes are minimal. Any person whatever their sex can be cruel, kind, empathic, rational, aggressive, passive or promiscuous. Myself and writers like Rippon and Joel ask that rather than imposing ideas of superiority and inferiority on entire groups, we simply accept this nuance. The greatest degree of human variation is seen at the level of the individual.

What concerns me is that, by focusing on categories and policing their boundaries, we forget this. We zero in on the things that make women different from men, forgetting that every woman is different from the next woman. To assume anything else is to engage in stereotyping. Indeed, it is stereotyping that has characterised not only sexism through the centuries, but also white feminism – a feminism that has historically viewed women through a constricted lens, and consequently ignored those who don't fit. For me, this is why Rippon and Joel offer the broadest and most exciting

visions for the future of scientific understanding of sex and gender. They ask that we keep in mind each and every person in their diversity, even while fighting for equality as socially-defined groups.

For another measured, well-evidenced account of what we really know about sex and gender from an academic who has many decades of experience in this area and has done experimental research to support her assertions, the American gender scholar Anne Fausto-Sterling cannot be bettered. Her classic book, *Sexing the Body*, first released in 2000, has been re-published in 2020 with useful updates. Wherever you stand in the debate, this is a good place to start.

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