

THE AUTHORITY GAP



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WHY
WOMEN
ARE
STILL
TAKEN
LESS
SERIOUSLY
THAN
MEN,
AND
WHAT
WE
CAN
DO
ABOUT
IT



'You have to read this.'

Daniel Finkelstein

MARY ANN SIEGHART

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Why women are *still* taken less seriously
than men, and what we can do about it

Mary Ann Sieghart



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To Dai, the unlikely feminist

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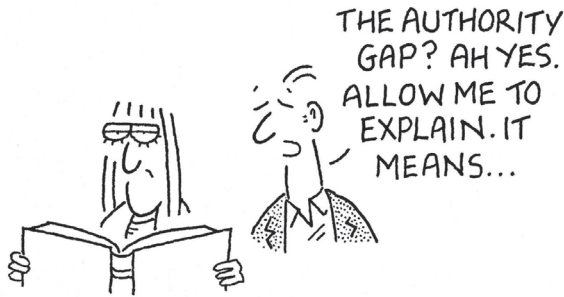
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Introduction

Why Bart Simpson has more authority than Margaret Thatcher



*He tells her that the earth is flat –
He knows the facts, and that is that.
In altercations fierce and long
She tries her best to prove him wrong,
But he has learned to argue well.
He calls her arguments unsound
And often asks her not to yell.
She cannot win. He stands his ground.
The planet goes on being round.*

– Wendy Cope

WHEN MARY MCALEESE was President of the Republic of Ireland, she led an official visit to the Vatican to meet Pope John Paul II. She was in the audience room at the head of her delegation, about to be introduced to the pontiff, when he reached straight past her, held out his hand to her husband instead, and asked him, 'Would you not prefer to be President of Ireland rather than married to the President of Ireland?' Her husband knew better than to take the bait. As McAleese told me in an interview for this book: 'I reached and took the hand which was hovering in mid-air and said, "Let me introduce myself. I am the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, elected by the people of Ireland, whether you like it or whether you don't."'¹

The Pope later claimed it was a joke but, if so, it was in poor taste. He had managed to snub a head of state before even acknowledging her presence. As McAleese recalled: 'He said, "I'm sorry, I tried a joke because I heard you had a great sense of humour." I said, "I do, but that wasn't funny because you would not have done that to a male President."' We would automatically respect a male head of state, so why not a female one? Because there is still an *authority gap* between women and men.

This sort of behaviour is incredibly frustrating for women. No one likes to be treated as if they're inferior, particularly if they're not. To see this more clearly, it helps to flip things around. So, if you're a man, I would like you to take a moment or two to do this thought experiment. Imagine living in a world in which you were routinely patronized by women. Imagine having your views ignored

or your expertise frequently challenged by them. Imagine trying to speak up in a meeting, only to be talked over by female colleagues. Imagine women subordinates resisting you as a boss, merely because of your gender. Imagine women superiors promoting other women, even if they are less talented than you. Imagine people always addressing the woman you are with before they address you. Imagine writing a book and finding that half the population is reluctant to read it because it is written by a man. Would you just shrug your shoulders and say, 'Well, that's fair enough. Men are different from women.' Or would it infuriate you? I think I can guess.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T is what the soul singer Aretha Franklin demanded, and it's what women still have to fight harder than men to earn. However much we claim to believe in equality, we are still, in practice, more reluctant to accord authority to women than to men, even when they are leaders or experts. Every woman has a tale to tell about being underestimated, talked over, ignored, patronized and generally not taken as seriously as a man. (And when I say 'woman', I mean anyone who identifies as a woman.) Great strides have been made, and many men are good and respectful listeners, but however liberal we think we are, we're nowhere near there.

Research shows that we still expect women to be less expert than men. Most of us – men and women – are still less willing to be influenced by women's views. And we still resist the idea of women having authority over us. In other words, there is still an authority gap between women and men.

And the authority gap is the mother of all gender gaps. If women aren't taken as seriously as men, they are going to be paid less, promoted less and held back in their careers. They are going to feel less confident and less entitled to success. If we don't do anything about it, the gap between women and men in the public sphere will never disappear.

That gap is both huge and unmerited. The difference between

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the amount that men and women are paid and promoted is fourteen times greater than the difference between their performance evaluations. This is because 70 per cent of men rate men more highly than women for achieving the same goals.² And in really prestigious jobs, in professions and senior management, women and men perform equally well, but women are paid significantly less.³

This is, at least in part, because we are still too ready to associate ‘male’ with ‘authority’. When I put together some slides to give a lecture on this subject at Oxford University, I knew I had to start by defining my terms. So I took a screenshot of the Oxford Dictionary Online’s definition of ‘authority’ – the very first result to come up on my Google search.⁴ Every sentence it offered as an example began with the same pronoun: ‘*He* had absolute authority over his subordinates’; ‘*He* has the natural authority of one who is used to being obeyed’; ‘*He* hit the ball with authority’; and ‘*He* was an authority on the stock market.’ I couldn’t have found a neater illustration of the problem. Yet didn’t Margaret Thatcher have the natural authority of one who was used to being obeyed? Doesn’t Serena Williams hit a ball with authority? Isn’t Helena Morrissey an authority on the stock market? I wasn’t looking for this differential treatment, only for a dictionary definition.

The same happened when I searched in Google Images for something to illustrate a slide on ‘expertise’. In the first twenty pictures, there wasn’t a single woman. Bart Simpson appeared before we reached the first female, in a group with men. Finally, there was a decent-sized photo of a woman, but it turned out that she was having something explained to her by a male expert. Sometimes your subject just jumps up and slaps you in the face.

Surely this is all changing now, though? We’re at last appointing more women to top jobs, and hurray for that. We now berate the Academy Award voters for ignoring female directors and are thrilled when more meaty parts are written for women. But what we’ve

been seeing in the developed world since #MeToo is a kind of lip-service feminism. We are still more likely to follow and retweet men than women on Twitter. We are still more likely – when we walk up to a man and woman standing together – to address the man first. Men are still more inclined to ignore books written by women, though women lap up books written by men.

Unconscious bias seems to dog each step forward we take, and we're far too ready to congratulate ourselves for the progress we've made and ignore, or fail to notice, the bias that still exists. In this book, I want to examine our biases in detail and map out the measures we can take, as individuals and as a society, to spot them, counteract them, and see them for what they are: an irrational and anachronistic product of social conditioning and outdated stereotypes.

Our brains are used to taking short cuts – what psychologists call 'heuristics' – and dividing the world into categories so that we don't have to process too much information. We overlay these templates on to something like a transparent film between us and the person we're interacting with. Instead of treating each person as an individual, we map on to them our assumptions about what they *should* be like or what we *expect* them to be like, based on the stereotypes we've been brought up with and are surrounded by. We associate men with leadership in the outside world and women with home. These stereotypes may bear no resemblance to the actual person in front of us, but that doesn't stop us applying them. As Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the former Danish prime minister, put it to me: 'We are people who walk around with a brain that is wired to be extremely prejudiced against female leaders because it just goes against the grain of what our Stone Age brain can capture.'⁵ It doesn't have to be evolutionarily determined from the Stone Age, though. It can be socially constructed from the contemporary world.

It's easy to underestimate how fundamental these templates are. We may have a sincere moral and intellectual objection to women

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being treated any differently from men. But the trouble is that once we've learned to see the world in a particular way, we may not even be aware of our subliminal prejudices. They are conveyed to us at too fundamental a level – as scientists of consciousness would explain, they are inextricably woven into the way we perceive the world.

Of course, there are also authority chasms between white and minority ethnic people, between people from different classes, between the able-bodied and the disabled, and between straight people and those with other sexualities. Each of these gaps deserves a whole book of its own, but I'm not the right person to write those books. So I'm mainly confining myself here to the gender authority gap, though I do also explore how it intersects with other biases.

The authority gap affects women all over the world, whatever the differences in culture. I've talked to women from Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East, as well as from Europe and America, and they all say that they have experience of being taken less seriously than men. We might not notice that we interrupt them more, challenge their expertise more and listen to them less. But many of us do, and it's both insulting and wrong. It makes women fume, it dents their confidence and it holds them back. It's high time we changed our behaviour.

Even the most senior of women experience it, particularly women of colour. I talked to Bernardine Evaristo, Booker Prize-winning novelist and Professor of Creative Writing. Despite her impeccable credentials, her evident brilliance and her charismatic personality, she still has to fight to persuade people to accord her the authority she deserves, especially a certain type of older white male student, 'who has come to learn from me but doesn't really believe that I have anything to teach him and will then challenge everything I say'.

'I have positions in my life where I have authority,' she told me. 'I am a professor at a university, and I am vice-chair of the Royal Society of Literature. I have now won the Booker. I have reviewed

books and written essays for newspapers for decades. So on the outside you think, “Well, this is somebody who walks with authority,” but actually, that’s not how I’m treated by society. I’m very aware of it, that people don’t automatically give me the authority that they would give someone else who they think should be in the positions that I hold.’⁶

And it’s not just men who do it. This is not a man-bashing book. It’s a consciousness-raising exercise for us all. For however progressive and intelligent we think we are, innumerable scientific studies show that we all – women as well as men – have unconscious biases, even against our own gender.⁷ We may not be aware of them – they are called ‘unconscious’ for a reason – but they spill out into our behaviour and, unless we notice and correct for them, we will continue to take women less seriously than men. We will continue to assume that a man knows what he’s talking about until he proves otherwise, while for a woman it’s all too often the other way around. The authority gap will remain as wide as ever.

I’m not exempt myself – I’m not sure that any of us are. I’m a lifelong feminist and I’ve written a book begging the world to take women more seriously, but I too can suffer from this bias. Sometimes I’ll hear a young woman being interviewed on the radio, who maybe has a high voice and sounds a bit childish in a way that men never do because their voices break, and I’ll find myself thinking, ‘I wonder if she knows what she’s talking about?’

Of course, I immediately feel guilty and try to compensate. I’ll listen carefully to what she’s saying and then judge her on the content of her speech, not the pitch of her voice. Because it’s only if we spot our bias in the first place, and then actively correct for it, that things can begin to change.

Over the course of writing this book, I’ve interviewed about fifty of the world’s most powerful, successful – and authoritative – women

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to see whether even they have experience of the authority gap. Frances Morris is right at the top of the art world. She is the Director of Tate Modern. But that only insulates her from the authority gap when people already know what she does. We met in her office, brimming with books, at the vast London gallery. She is startlingly intelligent and talks in fully formed paragraphs. 'As director of Tate Modern, I can spend all day as a powerful, articulate person who's taken seriously, and I can leave this building and I am nobody,' she told me.⁸ 'Because as a woman in the world out there, I'm not taken seriously. I'm very often in situations where people don't know my job and my hand is shaken after the hand of a male colleague, my eyes are met after the eyes of my husband are met, and no interest is shown in my opinion if it's just my opinion as a late middle-aged female. I see all that because it's in stark contrast with the way I'm approached and treated when it's known I'm the Director of Tate Modern.'

Might that not also be true of men in a similar position? 'No,' she insisted. 'I've worked for three male directors of Tate Modern, and it hasn't happened to them.'

I'm sure that Frances Morris is an avowed feminist. I doubt that Elaine Chao is. But you don't have to be a feminist to notice or care about these things. When I met her, Chao was US Transportation Secretary and a member of President Trump's Cabinet. We talked in her Washington office, with two of her long-standing senior female aides. Exuding confidence, and clearly one of those women who is used to dominating a room, she told me it had taken her until her late forties before she felt she was being listened to as much as her male colleagues. It finally happened when she became Labor Secretary under George W. Bush. 'Isn't that amazing?' she asked. 'I was forty-seven years old. For the first time in my life, I felt as if I had kind of made it.'⁹ But she had held several top leadership jobs before then, including Director of the US Peace Corps, so if

she wasn't listened to properly in those positions, it is a sign of how pervasive the authority gap is.

Women, even very senior ones, are so used to manifestations of the authority gap that they are pleasantly surprised when it doesn't show. Baroness Hale, then President of the UK Supreme Court, told me that she was taken aback when she and her (male) deputy hosted a meeting and the visitor, for once, addressed most of his questions to her rather than her deputy. It made her realize how unusual this was, even though she was the most senior person in the room – and in the whole judiciary.¹⁰

So why tell these top women's stories? If even super-powerful women have had their authority challenged, their views ignored and their expertise questioned, then it's a pretty good indicator that the rest of womankind have too. If they have managed to overcome this problem, their experiences can be useful to the rest of us, with much less privilege, from all backgrounds, in all walks of life.

But I've also talked to less well-known women, a diverse range across age, race and class. In the process, I haven't met a single one who hasn't encountered this phenomenon, from baby boomers through to Gen Xs, millennials and Gen Zs. Alice, a 27-year-old engineer, told me: 'When I'm leading a team, if there's a guy in exactly the same position, I get questioned a lot more. I have to fight more for the same sense of authority. My experience counts, but not as much as a man.'

Spotting our own biases is a start, but it's not the end. We need to address the problem at a structural level too. As long as we see many more men than women in positions of authority, we will tend to associate men with authority and women with subordinate status. As long as we allow boys to grow up believing that they are superior to girls, we are instilling habits of mind that will be very hard to change in later life. As long as we keep women in the workplace down by punishing them for being as assertive or

self-promoting as men, they will never advance in the same numbers. And as long as we make work patterns unfriendly for parents of both genders, we are going to prevent women from reaching the positions of authority they need to for society to rebalance its stereotypes.

In some countries, the bias is not remotely unconscious but runs visibly through the veins of the whole society. The documentary-maker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy has won two Oscars for her films highlighting the lowly status of women in Pakistan. 'Pakistan is a highly misogynistic country. It's deeply patriarchal,' she told me. 'Whether it's in small towns, villages or big cities, by and large men make decisions for women. Very few women are allowed to make decisions about their own lives. You will find the most educated women, the most empowered women on paper, unable to make simple decisions about their lives.' And if they rebel against this? 'The women who have the courage to articulate, to ask, to push, to demand more rights are maligned, are labelled and are often killed. So very few women now dare to publicly do that.'¹¹

In the developed world, thankfully, women are usually allowed to make decisions about their own lives. They can and do speak out for their rights without having to fear for their lives. But that doesn't mean that the problem has been solved, for covert sexism is very hard to fight. It is far easier for perpetrators to deny or dismiss. Women who complain about instances of it can be caricatured as chippy, over-sensitive or humourless, or told they are being hysterical and making it up. In the cases of women such as Mary McAleese, Frances Morris and Elaine Chao, I somehow doubt it. Their stories give credence to those of the rest of us.

What do we mean by 'authority'? I am using two definitions. The first is the influence that people have as a result of their knowledge and expertise – in other words, being considered authoritative on a subject.

The second is the exertion of power and leadership – in other words, having authority as a result of being in charge. This could as easily refer to authority within a family as to authority in the public sphere, but in this book I am writing about authority outside the home. Women throughout history have too often been palmed off with being given charge of the household. That's fine for some, but for many of us it's not enough. We deserve to be treated equally in all walks of life.

So how can an authority gap persist in the twenty-first century, when we've had two female prime ministers, and women as President of the Supreme Court, First Ministers of Scotland and Northern Ireland, and Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police? If authority is wrapped up with power and leadership, shouldn't we be over this by now? And if not, isn't it just a phenomenon of the older generation who were brought up with values formed in the 1960s and 1970s, when women still gushed in TV ads about Persil washing whiter and men in suits bossed their secretaries around?

Surprisingly, perhaps, we're still at it, even the young. I've talked to female university students who are clearly as clever as their male counterparts. Yet even they find themselves patronized and underestimated. Flora, 20, says, 'I have to work harder than the males in the group do to put my point across. Especially in a group that is male-dominated, people tend to listen first to the men. If a man tries to take charge in a group scenario, they are often taken more seriously. When female friends make suggestions, they are often shut down by the men making jokey comments which encourages other members of the group to chime in.'¹²

Ellie, 20, adds: 'In my subject group the men prefer to work together and exclude the women from interacting with them academically. There is an assumption that we are not their intellectual equals.'¹³

The trouble is, changes in the outside world take a long time to

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percolate into our subconscious, to change the stereotypes that lurk there. Until then, we have to actively notice when our unconscious bias plays tricks on our thoughts about other people – and that isn't easy. As Julia Gillard, former Prime Minister of Australia, who has co-written a book about women and leadership, told me: 'We've never lived in an environment free of any stereotyping. We've never lived with true gender equality. So even young people who are very highly sensitized, and don't want to be discriminating on the basis of gender or indeed on the basis of anything else, can't shed all of that social conditioning just through an act of will. You can't say, "I'm a feminist," and somehow all your social conditioning is gone. We need to be second-guessing what's happening in our brains, so we don't just give in to it.'¹⁴

But why does this happen? Well, millennia of men being in charge, of the patriarchy, have made their mark on our minds. They have made it quite normal for men to condescend to women and to treat them as subordinate. As recently as the early twentieth century, the novelist Arnold Bennett wrote a book called *Our Women* which included a chapter entitled 'Are Men Superior to Women?'¹⁵ It's not clear why he bothered to use a question mark. For in it he wrote: 'The truth is that intellectually and creatively man is the superior of women, and that in the region of creative intellect there are things that men almost habitually do but which women have not done and give practically no sign of ever being able to do.' No wonder the book enraged Virginia Woolf, who wrote two letters to the *New Statesman* taking issue with it.¹⁶

Aiming her barbs at the *Statesman's* literary editor, Desmond MacCarthy, who had reviewed Bennett's book under the *nom de plume* of Affable Hawk, Woolf wrote:

The fact that women are inferior to men in intellectual power, he says, 'stares him in the face.' He goes on to agree with Mr Bennett's

conclusion that 'no amount of education and liberty of action will sensibly alter it.' How, then, does Affable Hawk account for the fact which stares me, and I should have thought any other impartial observer, in the face, that the seventeenth century produced more remarkable women than the sixteenth, the eighteenth than the seventeenth, and the nineteenth than all three put together? . . . In short, though the pessimism about the other sex is always delightful and invigorating, it seems a little sanguine of Mr Bennett and Affable Hawk to indulge in it with such certainty on the evidence before them. Thus, though women have every reason to hope the intellect of the male sex is steadily diminishing, it would be unwise, until they have more evidence than the great war and the great peace supply, to announce it as a fact.

Even among those with average intellect, Bennett claimed that men were still superior: 'Every man knows in his heart, and every woman knows in her heart, that the average man has more intellectual power than the average woman . . . It is a fact as notorious as the fact that a man has more physical strength than a woman.' This book was published in the 1920s, the same decade as my mother was born: a woman who won places at both Oxford and Cambridge at the age of sixteen, despite having missed out on several years of schooling thanks to the Second World War.

It would be a foolish man who dared to write such nonsense today, in the face of scientific evidence showing women to be absolutely the intellectual equal of men. But we still had V. S. Naipaul, the novelist, claiming in 2011 that no female writer had ever written as well as he.¹⁷ And the American writer Norman Mailer writing in 1959 that 'a good novelist can do without anything but . . . his balls'.¹⁸

And the problem is that the world around us is still designed and led mainly by men. Most of us have grown up with our fathers

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working more and earning more than our mothers. We see, in all walks of public life, men making it more often to the top, and men being cited as authorities much more often than women. We have watched too many films in which men are the protagonists and women the helpmeets or sex objects, in which men have twice as many speaking parts, almost all of which are directed by men.¹⁹ We still live in a world in which men have the upper hand and help each other up the ladder, so no wonder we have internalized the notion that women must somehow be inferior and worthy of less respect.

Mahzarin Banaji is Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology at Harvard and an expert on unconscious or 'implicit' bias. This, as she told me, is how it comes about: 'Implicit bias comes from our social world, from our culture, because the content of what the brain knows is what it sees in the world. So I see that men do certain kinds of work and women do other kinds of work. If I had seen in my world that women were largely construction workers and engineers, that's what my brain would have learnt; and if I had seen in my world that men largely took care of children at home and cooked and cleaned for them, then that's what my brain would have learnt.'²⁰

We absorb the notion of male superiority from such an early age. British parents, when asked to estimate their children's IQ, will put their son, on average, at 115 (which in itself is hilarious, as the average ought to be 100) and their daughter at 107, a huge statistical difference.²¹ Why they do this is a mystery, as young girls develop faster than boys, have a bigger vocabulary, and do better at school. But the result is that boys, on average, grow up thinking that they are cleverer than girls, and vice versa. As early as five, studies show that children believe girls aren't as good at maths as boys (even though they are).²² And when asked to choose team-mates for a game for 'really, really smart' children, young children of both genders are more likely to choose boys than girls.²³ Yet, at that age,

girls are ahead of boys academically, and the children in the study knew it.

American parents, meanwhile, are two and a half times more likely to Google 'Is my son gifted?' than 'Is my daughter gifted?' even though girls make up 11 per cent more of the gifted and talented programmes in US schools.²⁴

No surprise, then, that adult men will, on average, put their own IQ at 110, while women estimate themselves to be just 105.²⁵ Yet we know that, except for at the far extremes of the IQ curve, women's and men's IQs are distributed identically. Girls, on average, get higher grades at school and are more likely than boys to win places at university, masters courses and beyond. The main reason for boys and men to think that they are cleverer than girls and women must be because their parents, teachers and society have – incorrectly – imbued them with the belief that they are.

Some readers will claim that this is all old hat. Aren't women now being favoured? In fact, aren't they now getting all the top jobs? Isn't it hardest of all these days to be a middle-aged white man: 'pale, male and stale'? Well, it is harder than it was, when all those characteristics conferred a massive advantage in every aspect of life. And it's true that some of the top jobs that have been held by men throughout their existence are at last having women appointed to them. Structurally, things are starting to change for the better. But, as the experience of the highly successful women I've quoted shows, even getting a top job doesn't entirely insulate you from having your authority challenged.

Nor is the change happening so fast that men are unfairly suffering, though it may feel that way when male privilege starts to be withdrawn. And by 'privilege' I don't mean wealth or social status: merely the fact of being a man rather than a woman. Boris Johnson, for instance, was praised for promoting women in his first Cabinet, but they still occupied only eight out of thirty-three positions: in

other words, there were three men for every woman around that table, in a supposedly representative democracy. And, at the time of writing, there are still only six female CEOs of Britain's hundred biggest listed companies. Women still have a very long way to go – and men still have a very long way to fall – before we get anywhere near equality.

Yet, just as men tend to feel that women are dominating a discussion when they talk for only 30 per cent of the time, they often feel that women are getting an unfair crack when they are merely, at last, being treated a little more equally.²⁶ A former editor of mine told me that my book was out of date because the only people being appointed to boards these days were women; men no longer had a chance. The next day, I sent him the figures for the previous month: there had been twenty male board appointments and nineteen female ones. Nothing like enough to even out the existing 2:1 ratio of men to women on boards, but better than it used to be. And although board appointments are now, at last, more equal thanks to government insistence, the same isn't true for executive jobs. For him, though, it felt like male annihilation.

As the philosopher Kate Manne puts it in *Down Girl*: 'These bastions [of privilege] are often well-defended and difficult to challenge. For people are often, unsurprisingly, deeply invested in their continuation. To make matters worse, these structures are often quite invisible to the people whose privileged social positions they serve to uphold and buttress. So dismantling them may feel not only like a *comedown*, but also an *injustice*, to the privileged. They will tend to feel *flattened*, rather than merely *levelled*, in the process.'²⁷

She is right about the invisible nature of privilege, which is the flip side of bias. Most men simply don't notice it. And why would they? I struggle to notice my white privilege, the fact that people aren't biased against me because of my skin colour. Yet, in everyday

life, it's as if men are swimming with the current in a river and women are swimming against it. The men see the banks racing past them and congratulate themselves for swimming so powerfully. They look at the women struggling to make headway against the current and think, 'Why can't they swim as fast as me? They're obviously not as good.' Unless they make a conscious and sustained effort to do so, men can't feel the current, and they put their success – and women's relative lack of it – down to pure merit. It's human nature not to want to believe that privilege, and the bias it engenders, has helped them along. Or that women are being held back, despite their merit.

This means there is a deep asymmetry. When I talk to men about this subject, some of them – like my former editor – express scepticism. They tell me that the problem has been solved, that my thesis is out of date, because lots of women are being appointed to top jobs. If anything, women are being favoured and men are suffering. This is because they can't see the continuing bias and we can. They don't experience the myriad little insults to their self-esteem and competence that women have to put up with daily or weekly. Not only is their reaction as wrong-headed as a white person telling a person of colour that racism doesn't exist; it also proves the exact point of this book, that women's authority is questioned and challenged even when they know more than the person they are talking to. For, as you will see, there is a huge amount of evidence for the continued existence of the authority gap. It's resistant to being mansplained away.

Although there has been some recent progress at the very top, with women being appointed to jobs that have always been held by men, the underlying assumptions about women's expertise don't seem to have changed much. When I interviewed her, Liz Truss was Chief Secretary to the Treasury, but after Boris Johnson took over as Prime Minister she had made it no secret that she wanted to

be Chancellor of the Exchequer (a job no woman has held). A lot of people questioned whether she would be up to it, even though her background was in economics and finance. She is gloriously stropic about the way she is still treated. 'As a woman in politics you have to prove your expertise more,' she told me.²⁸ 'So, I'm a qualified accountant and an economist and I'm Chief Secretary to the Treasury [the Chancellor's deputy], but there are still question marks. I got asked how good my maths was the other day, for God's sake. I've got a double A level in maths!' I don't recall people presuming that her former colleague, George Osborne, wasn't up to the job of Chancellor, even though he read history at university and had never done a job involving finance or economics.

The same still happens in the private sector too. Anne Mulcahy – tall, commanding and super-articulate – is an extraordinarily successful American businesswoman. She took over as CEO of Xerox when it was a giant but struggling photocopier company being superseded by digital technology. It looked destined to go the way of Kodak. The day she was appointed, the shares fell 15 per cent, which was, as she wryly said, 'a real confidence-builder'. The company was on the verge of bankruptcy, had been making losses for six years and had over \$17 billion in debt. After Mulcahy brought it back to profitability against all the odds, *Money* magazine described it as 'the great turnaround story of the post-crash era'.²⁹ And, in 2005, *Fortune* magazine named her the second most powerful woman in business, after Meg Whitman, CEO of eBay.

Given this, you might think she would be seen as an unquestioned business superstar. She certainly would if she were a man with the same record. Yet, as she told me, 'When I join a new board, when I take a new role, there's a "wait and see". You don't come in with that kind of assumption that you've earned where you are and therefore you don't have to prove yourself again.'³⁰

These accounts may be anecdotal. But the experience of having

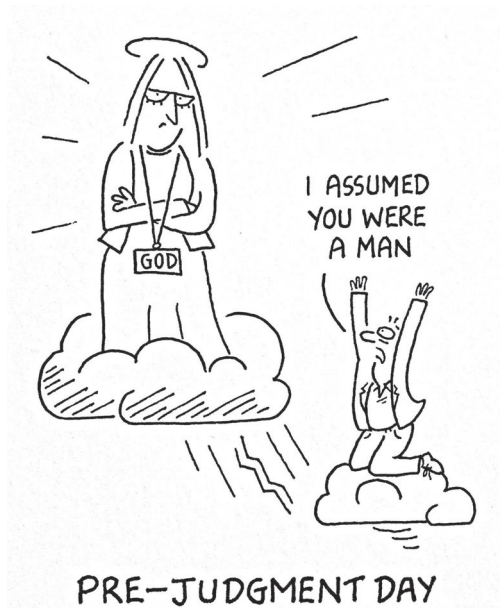
our authority and expertise underestimated or challenged is something that pretty much all women share. Research shows that women are twice as likely as men to say that they have to provide more evidence of their competence. They are much more likely than men to say that their expertise is challenged, that they are interrupted or talked over and that other people take credit for their ideas.³¹ When I was writing this book and told people what it was about, some men seemed perplexed, but every woman was delighted. All smiled in recognition, and many said, ‘Yesss!’ and that they couldn’t wait till the book came out.

But we don’t just have to ask ourselves and other women about it. For this book, I have scoured the academic and professional worlds for concrete evidence and studies on women’s authority, influence, competence and power. I am going to bring you research from a wide variety of disciplines – psychology, sociology, linguistics, politics, management and business – and I have also commissioned new research. I have done my best to suggest solutions: ways for us to counter our bias and to bring up a new generation to think and behave differently. And I want to show what we can all gain – men as well as women – from taking women more seriously.

I

You don't have to read this chapter

(unless you're a sceptic about
the authority gap)



*'We did not like to declare ourselves women, because . . .
we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to
be looked on with prejudice.'*

– Charlotte Brontë

MOST WOMEN WILL instantly recognize the phenomenon of the authority gap. It's as obvious – and as annoying – as the gender pay gap. More enlightened men appreciate it too. If you're one of the above, feel free to skip to the next chapter. But if you're sceptical that the gap exists, or if you secretly believe that it may be justified, please read on for the irrefutable evidence that supports my case.

When the Boston writer Catherine Nichols finished the final draft of her first novel, she asked several accomplished writer friends to have a look at it. They reassured her that it was ready to go, and that she should start approaching agents. So she sent the same covering letter and first few pages of the novel to fifty agents and sat, excited, to see what the response would be.

She waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. Eventually the replies started trickling in: all rejections. Out of the fifty agents, only two asked to see the full manuscript, but with no guarantee that they would be interested in representing her. 'My writer friends still promised it was a good book, that I should have faith in my work, that good news would be around the corner. It wasn't.'¹

So Nichols conceived what she called her 'nutty plan'.² She created an email account in a man's name, similar to her own, and decided to send exactly the same letter and sample chapter to some more agents. She sent off the first submission, and before she had even drafted the second she received a reply saying, 'Delighted. Excited. Please send the manuscript.'³

To the six queries she sent on the first day, she received five

instant replies. Three asked for the manuscript and two were warm rejections, praising his 'exciting' project. 'It was shocking how fast it became obvious there was a big difference,' she told me.⁴ So she decided to approach fifty agents under the male name, just to see exactly how big that difference was. She got seventeen positive replies compared with two, which meant, she joked, 'I was an eight and a half times better writer under a male name.' One agent, who had rejected her as Catherine, not only asked to read George's book, but wanted to send it to a more senior colleague.

Even the rejections were more complimentary and helpful. As a woman, she had won praise for her 'beautiful writing', but that was it. As a man, she was told her work was 'clever', 'well constructed' and 'exciting' and was given useful advice as to how to improve the novel. 'That is where I went from feeling flattered to feeling angry,' she told me. 'As a man, I felt the critical responses were getting into the structure of the book, or the thought processes of the characters, or the mechanics of the plot. That level of attention was truly helpful when it came to redoing parts of the book.' As a man, she was being coached, but not as a woman. And many more of these agents were women than men.

'So what must it feel like to be a man?' I asked her. She burst out laughing. 'It must feel *amazing* to be a man!'

Nichols had changed only the crucial variable: gender. Her experience may be anecdotal, but social scientists have replicated it in rather more rigorous experiments. Corinne Moss-Racusin, John Dovidio and other colleagues, in a randomized double-blind study, sent out applications for a lab manager position to male and female science professors at top universities.⁵ The application materials were identical, but the applicants were randomly assigned male or female names.

The professors rated the 'male' applicant as significantly more competent and hireable than the (identical) 'female' one. They offered

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him a higher starting salary and more career mentoring. The stereotypes in these professors' brains were playing havoc with their rational, scientific judgement. As a result, the professors conferred more authority and expertise on the 'male' applicant than the 'female' one, even though the two were identically qualified. Their unconscious bias created an authority gap where none should have existed.

What is more, the female professors were just as biased as the male ones. We'll see in Chapter 9 why that is. Dovidio, a Professor of Psychology at Yale, told me, 'That tends to perpetuate it even more, because if you have people making a joint decision and a member of the minority group goes along with members of the majority group who have these subtle biases, it legitimizes the response, where you're going to continue to hire the man rather than the woman. When women exhibit this subtle bias, it frees up men to exhibit this subtle bias more.'⁶

Another study asked students taking an online course to rate their instructor.⁷ If they thought they were being taught by a man, they gave higher ratings than if they thought they were being taught by a woman. The instructor, of course, was the same person. According to the authors, 'The results were astonishing. Students gave professors they thought were male much higher evaluations across the board than they did professors they thought were female, regardless of what gender the professors actually were.' So the 'men' were being accorded greater authority than the 'women'.

A similar study with psychology professors – both male and female – found that they rated identical CVs more highly when they had a man's name at the top, and were more likely to offer him a job.⁸ They were also more likely to say that he had good research and teaching experience, even though the applicants' experience was exactly the same. Interestingly, though, when the professors were sent a more senior scientist's CV and were asked whether 'he' or 'she' should be awarded tenure, there seemed to be no bias

against the female applicant. However, the authors acknowledge that they probably sent too good a CV for this part of the experiment, and it would have been hard to resist recommending tenure. They conclude: 'A superb record may indeed function as a buffer for gender bias when making promotional decisions.' That explains why outstanding women sometimes do manage to make it to the top in real life, albeit in smaller proportions than men do.

But even though the exceptional 'female' applicant was recommended for tenure as often as the 'male', the professors were four times more likely to write cautionary comments in the margins of their responses to her, such as, 'It is impossible to make such a judgement without teaching evaluations'; 'We would have to see her job talk'; and 'I would need to see evidence that she had gotten these grants and publications on her own.' It's extraordinary, and depressing, that – even in the twenty-first century – people still find it hard to believe that women can be exceptional. On the 'male' application, by contrast, there were few such cautionary comments.

A 'superb' record of achievement can definitely act as a buffer against bias. Many of the extremely successful women I've talked to during the research for this book had this record. And they knew that being really, really good at their job was their only hope of advancement. As the Chinese-American businesswoman Wan Ling Martello put it to me: 'More than knowing what you're doing, you have to be super competent at what you're doing. That is to me first and foremost. That just gives you licence to play with the boys. Without that, you can forget it.'⁹ For women in professional jobs know that they can't afford to fail; unlike men, they are unlikely to be given a second chance.

Once my interviewees got to the very top, some of them said they felt much more protected from overt instances of the authority gap. It was harder for people to disrespect them or discount their opinions once they were in charge.

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I went to visit Helle Thorning-Schmidt in the north London home that she shares with her British MP husband, Stephen Kinnock. She's fizzing with energy and talks faster in English than most of us native speakers. She told me: 'There's a huge difference between getting to the top and being at the top in terms of how you get treated as a woman, and I really felt that once I was Prime Minister that I didn't get treated very differently from men. It was because, being Prime Minister, I had the authority and I had a lot of power.'¹⁰ She was running a country in Scandinavia, though, which was already well in advance of most other nations in its attitudes to gender equality. As we'll see in Chapter 3, the female leaders of Chile and Australia didn't find themselves totally immune from the authority gap even when they reached the pinnacle of power.

The world of business may be better for female leaders once they finally reach the C-suite. Anne Mulcahy suffered some horrible sexism on her way up the corporate pyramid to run Xerox. But 'when you become CEO, it's almost like you're an honorary man. There's power that comes with the position, so it's harder for people to confront or not listen or not be respectful. That's fabulous, right?'¹¹

It sure is. But without the insulation afforded by being the ultimate boss (and sometimes even with it), women are still thought to be less authoritative than men. We seem to be programmed to assume that men are more expert and more hireable than women.

Could there perhaps be a genuine justification for this bias? Could it be that, on average, men are indeed cleverer, better qualified and better informed than women, and that it therefore makes sense to rate them more highly and respect them more? In other words, is the authority gap justified? Let's look at the evidence. From a very early age, girls outperform boys. They develop faster, talking earlier, learning self-discipline at an earlier age, and using a bigger vocabulary.¹² They get better grades at school, particularly in the humanities, but also in maths and science in some countries,

and outnumber boys at university.^{13 14} In the US, they win 57 per cent of masters degrees and 53 per cent of doctorates.¹⁵ So there is no question that they are better educated and qualified than men, at least in the younger generations, who weren't held back from going to university.

On average, girls and women are exactly as intelligent as boys and men.¹⁶ There is evidence suggesting that boys and men have more variable IQs: that there are a lot more males at the very bottom of the IQ distribution and a few more at the very top.¹⁷ The disproportion at the bottom is far higher than that at the top: those with the very lowest IQs tend to be male, as boys are more prone to developmental disorders. It's not clear whether the smaller differences at the very top are due to biological or social differences. As we saw earlier, parents tend to believe their sons are cleverer and may encourage them more. And as early as the age of six, children of both genders believe that boys are more likely to be 'really, really smart' than girls, which probably gives girls less intellectual confidence and boys more.¹⁸

Is there any evidence that can help us decide whether this out-performance at the very top end of the intelligence scale is a biological difference between the genders or something that reflects the way we are brought up? It is interesting that, back in the 1970s and 1980s in the US, boys who were *exceptionally* good at maths outnumbered girls by thirteen to one. Now the ratio is as low as two to one.¹⁹ In some countries and among some ethnic groups, the gap doesn't exist.²⁰ This strongly suggests that the difference in mathematical ability is unlikely to be biological or innate, or it wouldn't vary across time, place and ethnicity. Indeed, in countries with greater gender equality, there are more gifted and profoundly gifted female mathematicians.²¹ So it seems likely to be more a matter of expectations – from parents, teachers and other children – and social conditioning than anything inherently different in our brains.

What is certainly true is that at the very top levels of academic achievement at school, girls are easily outperforming boys. In 2019, the UK brought in a new system of grading GCSE exams, which went from 9 at the top to 1 at the bottom. A 9 is an even higher grade than the previous A*, and very few students were expected to win a clean sweep of 9s. In the end, 837 pupils in the whole country did so, representing the top 0.1 per cent of exam-takers. Of these, girls outnumbered boys by two to one.²² So there is absolutely no evidence on which to base the lazy assumption that boys or men are cleverer than girls or women: quite the opposite.

People still worry that not enough girls study STEM subjects, and many secretly suspect that girls' brains just aren't cut out for maths and science. But there is surprisingly little angst about the consistent underperformance of boys in humanities. In literacy, fifteen-year-old girls are significantly better than boys in every single one of the seventy-two countries surveyed by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment.²³ In these countries, girls, on average, match boys at maths and are only marginally behind in science, and they are well ahead at reading. So when it comes to choosing what to study at A level or for university, and teachers say to students, 'Do what you're best at,' it's quite logical that boys have been more likely to choose STEM subjects and girls humanities. It's a question of comparative advantage, not of girls' brains being unsuited to science. According to one study, it explains up to 80 per cent of the gender gap in choosing maths-related studies and careers.²⁴ But even this is beginning to change. In 2019, for the first time, girls marginally outnumbered boys in the UK in taking science A levels, perhaps because schools are at last encouraging them to do so.²⁵

The one science in which girls still lag well behind is physics. Boys outnumber girls taking physics A level by more than three to one. Interestingly, girls at single-sex independent schools are four

times more likely to do A-level physics than girls at co-ed state schools, which again suggests that this is a social rather than an intellectual problem.²⁶ Girls may feel less comfortable studying what's seen as a rather masculine, nerdy subject alongside boys in the classroom.

The same is true for young women at university. In one study, female students were asked why they weren't majoring in subjects such as engineering and computer science.²⁷ It wasn't the maths or science that was putting them off or anxiety that the subjects might be too difficult. Overwhelmingly, it was that they thought there was gender discrimination on these courses.

And they'd probably be right. A study of female graduate students in physics and astronomy found that 76 per cent said they had suffered sexism, and this included real evidence of the authority gap.²⁸ For instance, Janet told the researchers, 'I feel that I am not listened to within my group. This is mostly by my peers (my adviser tends to do a better job). A lot of my suggestions are brushed off. If, later, they turned out to be correct, people forget that I ever made them. In another situation, I told the grad student under me that he should consider a certain factor in trying to make sense of his data. He said no and ignored me. When the other [male] grad student/post doc suggested it, he was open to it right away.' She's describing the authority gap in action.

If women's abilities are every bit as good as men's, maybe the problem is that they don't have the personality to earn authority? Psychologists Paul Costa, Antonio Terracciano and Robert McCrae compared the scores of 1,000 American men and women on a personality test designed to assess the 'big five' personality traits: extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness and neuroticism.²⁹ The gender differences were not the same across all cultures, suggesting that these characteristics are not evolutionally