

Women seen to lack the right stuff for science: survey

September 16 2015, by Marlowe Hood



A European survey shows many people believe women don't have what it takes to become scientists

In a survey covering five west European countries published Wednesday, two out of three respondents said women don't have what it takes to become top-tier scientists.

When asked to choose one or more abilities women lack that would

prevent them from "becoming a high-level scientist," 67 percent of those surveyed ticked off at least one.

A quarter opined that women didn't have enough self-confidence, while 20 percent said they lacked "a professional network" or "competitiveness."

In descending order, other abilities found wanting were ambition, an interest in the subject, perseverance, and a "rational mindset."

Only 33 percent of [respondents](#) said women had all the requisite qualities to join the ranks of the world's research-grade physicists, chemists and biologists.

The issue of [women in science](#) jumped into the headlines earlier this year when British Nobel laureate Tim Hunt was forced to resign from an honorary university position after remarks he made about collaborating with women.

"Let me tell you about my trouble with girls," the 72-year-old Hunt was reported as saying at a World Conference of Science Journalists in South Korea, in what he later described as an apparent attempt to be forthright and entertaining.

"Three things happen when they are in the lab: you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticise them they cry."

Elizabeth Blackburn, an American of Australian origin who shared a Nobel in medicine in 2009 for work on chromosomes, told AFP that women are frequently confronted with sexism in the laboratory.



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She recalled from her own experience an "arrogant" comment by a senior colleagues in 1984 just after she had presented to peers research that would eventually lead to her Nobel.

"'Oh, she's going about that in all the wrong way'," she recalled him saying.

"I remember thinking, 'How does he know?'. I don't think he would have said that if I had been a man. It made me more determined than ever."

"But it was the beginning of my career," she added. "It could have discouraged me."

To date, only three percent of Nobels have been awarded to women in the 115 year history of the prize, which covers—in science—medicine, physics and chemistry.

The survey results were similar across all five countries, but Germans, at 71 percent, were the most sceptical of women's professional capacities.

Next was Italy at 70 percent, followed by France and Britain (64 percent), and then Spain (63 percent).

Strikingly, women were as likely to cast doubt on their own qualifications, and gave an even lower mark than men for female "self-confidence" in the workplace.



Given an opportunity to elaborate, some women in the survey pointed to what they saw as deep-seated differences impeding equality in science

"Often women don't dare apply for desired academic positions," Blackburn said. "You have to encourage them to do so."

Given an opportunity to elaborate, some women in the survey pointed to what they saw as deep-seated differences impeding equality in science.

"They (men) are more scientific and women are more literary, that's my impression," said one.

"Boys are perhaps more ambitious for success, they like to be in competition, while we're less so...", said another.

One man pointed to cultural inertia. "Women have been in science for 100 years but men have done it for hundreds of years, so naturally they've had more time to make more progress," he said.

At the same time, more than 60 percent of respondents, who were evenly divided between men and women, said it would be a good thing if there were as many [women](#) as men Nobel laureates.

The online "Women in Science" survey of 5,032 people, conducted from June 10 to 15, was done by the French firm Opinionway for the Foundation L'Oreal.

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