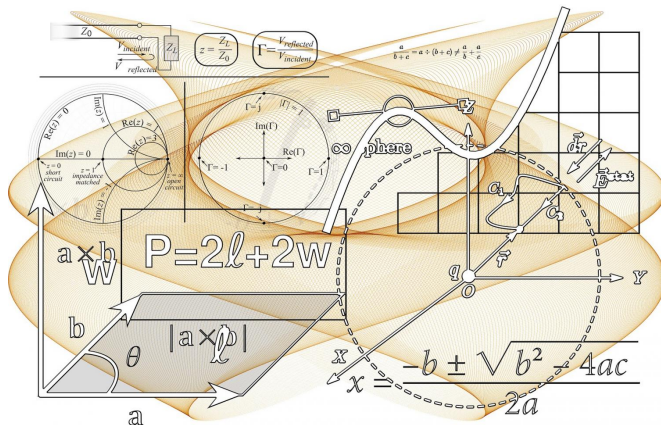


Study of accreditation exams reveals biases actually favor women in STEM positions

29 July 2016, by Bob Yirka



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(Phys.org)—A pair of researchers with the Paris School of Economics in France has conducted an analysis of competitive exam results that are used as a basis for hiring teachers in that country and has found that there exists a bias toward grading women higher in traditionally male-dominated fields. In their paper published in the journal *Science*, Thomas Breda and Mélina Hillion describe their study and results, and suggest that policies that target female students at an early age be modified to reflect the reality that young women face when considering a career in one of the sciences.

There has been a lot of discussion in the education and employment fields over the past few years regarding the disproportionate number of males in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) positions in many countries around the world. Some have suggested that the imbalance is a problem that needs to be addressed because it limits opportunities for women. Some have also suggested that the imbalance occurs because of male based biases in hiring practices. In this new

effort, the research pair sought to discover whether this holds true for educational institutions.

In France, those seeking teaching positions from grade school through college must take competitive exams—the exams have two parts, written and oral. The researchers obtained exam results from 10,000 applicants covering 11 different fields—some STEM, and some not STEM. For the study, the written parts of exams were graded with names hidden to prevent [gender identification](#). Gender identification with oral grading was, of course, identifiable by graders. The implication was that the proportional numbers of people of a given [gender](#) passing the exams would be an accurate measure of the proportion of people of a given gender that would land a job as a teacher in their chosen field.

Analyzing their data, the researchers were surprised to find that the gender bias that existed was actually in favor of the female students taking tests in STEM fields—they ranked it in the 10th percentile, which suggests women would have a leg up in being hired in their chosen fields. Interestingly, they also found a small gender bias for males taking exams in traditionally female-dominated fields.

The researchers conclude by suggesting that their results indicate that policies aimed at encouraging [young women](#) to enter STEM fields should focus on the girls who are still too young to have made any career plans.

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