



Where Were You on 1/14?

By Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel

Indignation over the perceived insult rendered by Harvard president Lawrence H. Summers in suggesting the possibility of innate differences between men and women has exposed the lack of intellectual debate that prevails in modern academia.

On March 21, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University hosted a conference entitled “Impediments to Change: Revisiting the Women in Science Question.” The auditorium in Agassiz Theatre in Radcliffe Yard was packed. Dedicated in 1904, the theatre has been the site of many a spirited intellectual exchange. But on this occasion it was a forum not for debate but for indignation over the insult that the assembled referred to as “1/14”—the date when Harvard president Larry Summers fatefully speculated about the possibility of inborn differences between the sexes. Many in the room will forever remember where they were and what they were doing when the news of Summers’s remark first broke. 1/14 is a day that will live in infamy.

Stifling Debate

The Radcliffe Institute, its website says, is dedicated to “embodying the highest values of inquiry.” Those values, it appears, do not include the consideration of opposing views. The six assembled panelists, four from Harvard and two from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, did not challenge one another—as scholarly

panelists often do—but basked in their shared conviction that there is only one explanation for why fewer women than men teach math and physics at Harvard or MIT: sexist bias. In fact, their only motive for “revisiting” the women-in-science question was to give a proper burial to the hypothesis that there are significant biologically based differences between men and women. In fact, there was not a single assertion in the course of the entire conference of the possibility that there may be real innate differences between men and women.

In one weird outburst, audience member Professor Zella Luria from Tufts University warned of the dangers posed to women’s progress by a “cute guy who writes well and has a gorgeous wife.” She was referring to Steven Pinker, the Harvard psychologist who dared to explain why it may be that “males and females do not have interchangeable minds” in his book *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002). He was not invited to this event. Why should they host him at Radcliffe? That would be like inviting a flat-earthier or a Holocaust denier. “In this day and age to believe that men and women differ in their basic competence for math and science is as insidious as believing that some people are better suited to be slaves than masters,” panelist Mahzarin Banaji, a professor in the Harvard psychology department, told the *Harvard Crimson*.

Nancy Hopkins was another speaker. The MIT biologist has become known as the professor who

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fled the room on 1/14. "I felt I was going to be sick," she famously said. At the Radcliffe confab, Hopkins again talked about how Summers affected her physiology: "I had to walk out out of respect for my blood pressure." For this show of courage, the audience gave her a standing ovation. But the room soon quieted down when she told a harrowing tale of hate mail she had received. A Harvard alum had sent her some air sickness bags and urged her to consult a physician. "I would suggest a psychiatrist," he wrote. Audience members gasped as the sheer misogyny of it all.

Perhaps the most troubling presentation was that of Harvard psychologist Elizabeth Spelke. She declared herself a careful researcher concerned about scientific methodology and accurate results. But instead of acknowledging the complexity and vibrancy of the debate over psychological and cognitive sex differences, she announced that the matter was closed. The evidence against inborn differences, she said, "is as conclusive as any case I know in science."

One "Casualty of Sexism"

Then Mariangela Lisanti took the podium. She is a Harvard senior majoring in physics and scheduled to graduate with honors. She is president of Women in Science at Harvard-Radcliffe, already a published author, and, in high school, winner of the first prize in

the Intel Science Talent Search (\$100,000 scholarship award) and the Siemens-Westinghouse Science and Technology Competition (another \$100,000 prize). At Harvard, she won a Goldwater Scholarship, the premier undergraduate award in the fields of mathematics, the natural sciences, and engineering.

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Notwithstanding her achievements, Lisanti portrayed herself as a casualty of sexism. Though conceding she had never experienced overt bias, she said that discouragement hung in the air in a subtle way that "made it harder to deal with." For example, when she and a male student won the Goldwater Awards, a young man came up to congratulate the male student but ignored her. Audience members and panelists were clearly distressed to hear what she had endured. But more distressing than

Lisanti's perceived slight was her presence on the panel in the first place. The extraordinary talents of the young Harvard student have been abundantly recognized and rewarded, yet here she was, feeling compelled to adopt the persona of a victim.

If these traumatized conference participants should somehow succeed in establishing "1/14" as a notable day in American academic history, then another infamous day will also deserve adverse notice: on "3/21" Radcliffe College, once synonymous with the highest standards of women's education, abandoned all pretense to intellectual seriousness.