

Women in philosophy

Why should we get more of them,
and how do we do it?

The Problem

The representation of women is pretty bad!

- Philosophy (UK, circa 2009):
 - UG 46%, PGT 37%, PGR 31%, permanent staff 24%, Professorial staff 14%
- The biggest drop is between UG and PGT.
- Figures in other countries I know about (e.g. Australia, US) are similar.

Why should we do something?

Quality

Hypothesis: women have just as much aptitude for philosophy as men!

So if women are underrepresented amongst professional philosophers, the overall standard of research and teaching is lower than it would be if they weren't underrepresented.

Why should we do something?

Fairness

Hypothesis:

Not all women who fail to progress (beyond UG, etc.) do so because of an inherent dislike of philosophy or of academia as a profession.

At least some of them are leaving because of contingent features of the profession that **unfairly** discriminate against women.

Unfairness is bad!

Three barriers

- Gender stereotypes
- Discrimination
- Harassment

Obviously, none of these barriers have anything to do with the intrinsic nature either of philosophy itself or of an academic career in philosophy.

So we should strive to eliminate them or (more realistically) minimise both their occurrence and their effects.

Gender stereotypes

Philosophy is a traditionally/stereotypically male discipline:

- All of the traditional 'greats' are dead white males.
- The majority of philosophers that students read are men.
- Stereotypical association of 'male' with 'reason' (and 'female' with feeling or intuition).
- The stereotypical good-at-logic student ...

Gender stereotypes

The 'reason' stereotype may have more of an effect in philosophy than in some other areas because reason is both:

- a major part of philosophical method (obviously!), and
- an object of philosophical study.

In mathematical philosophy, the stereotype is likely to be at its strongest because of its association with math.

The figures for the representation of women in math are even worse than for philosophy – and start from a much lower base at UG level.

This means that women are likely to be underrepresented in MP right from the start.

Gender stereotypes

Other reasons why the environment can make female students seem less at home:

Women tend to:

- exhibit fewer of the philosophically 'valuable' character traits:
 - less confident, less willing to land the killer blow, acculturated into thinking that they shouldn't act too clever or be too assertive/competitive/ambitious;
- be less likely to volunteer to present;
- be the object of unhelpful stereotypical assumptions by other students, e.g.:
 - women do well because they work hard. Men do well because they're naturally good at the subject.

What do gender stereotypes do?

- Increasingly strong evidence that gender and other stereotypes generate both **implicit bias** and **stereotype threat**.
- **Implicit bias:** Unconsciously downgrading people who don't fit the 'philosopher' mould.
- **Stereotype threat:** Actually performing less well when the stereotype is triggered.

It's stressful feeling that you have something to prove!

E.g. being the only woman in the class/committee meeting/shortlist. This happens a lot!

What do gender stereotypes do?

Claude Steele:

“when you realise that this stressful experience is probably a chronic feature of the setting for you, it can be difficult for you to stay in the setting, to sustain your motivation to succeed there. Disproving a stereotype is a Sisyphean task; something you have to do over and over again as long as you are in the domain where the stereotype applies.”

Discrimination & implicit bias

- Plenty of anecdotal evidence of **overt discrimination** on the 'What is it like to be a woman in philosophy?' blog.
- Evidence of **implicit bias** from social psychology research:
 - CV study (Steinpreis et al, 1999)
 - Implicit association tasks (IATs)
 - Language used in academic references (Schmader et al, 2007)

Discrimination & implicit bias

- Implicit bias is **unconscious**. Having the opposite conscious belief (e.g. explicitly anti-sexist or anti-racist views) often doesn't help at all! In fact, it can make things worse.
- Women are just as susceptible as men! (We all carry the same stereotypes around with us.)
- Highly speculative suggestion: philosophers may be especially vulnerable because we're especially averse to the idea that we aren't entirely rational or objective in our judgements (at least when we're trying).
- It's an interesting philosophical question whether (or in what circumstances) we're morally responsible for acting on the basis of IBs.

Harassment

- Lots of anecdotal evidence of harassment (and worse) on the ‘What is it like to be a woman in philosophy?’ blog (and, recently, in the media).
- No real evidence that things are worse in philosophy than anywhere else – but obviously that doesn’t make it OK!

What’s being done?

National initiatives

UK:

- STEMM subjects have been addressing this issue for some time (Athena Swan).
- Gender Equality Charter Mark scheme for the humanities (similar to Athena Swan) coming soon.
- British Philosophical Association/Society for Women in Philosophy Good Practice Scheme.



What's being done?

National initiatives

Australia:

- Australasian Association of Philosophy has a Standing Committee for Women in Philosophy.

USA:

- American Philosophical Association has a Committee on the Status of Women.
- Recently launched a 'site visit' scheme.
- Currently considering devising an international 'good practice' scheme modelled on the BPA/SWIP scheme.

What can we do?

- Generic institutional policies and procedures, e.g. at university level, are necessary and good, but ...
- The problems exist where we are – in our classes, seminars, conferences, casual conversations, departmental committee discussions, etc.
- So we are the ones who need to act.
- Fortunately, there's a lot we can do!

What can we do?

Teaching

- Normalise reading and discussing women's work:
 - Increase the % of texts by women on reading lists and set seminar texts.
- Think about the examples we give in class.
 - A fairly recent and much-discussed example in the free will literature involves Prof Plum killing Ms White.
- How can we maximise exposure to women lecturers/TAs (without increasing the teaching burden on women)?

What can we do?

Teaching

Think about the environment in seminars.

- Awareness of student behaviour.
- Think about ways to encourage less confident students to participate more, and the more confident ones to dominate the discussion less.
- How would I deal with difficult dynamics or inappropriate comments in the seminar room?
- Use of peer observation.

Encourage good students (M and F) to consider graduate study.

What can we do?

Hiring and promotions

- Some evidence that:
 - Awareness of the existence and effects of IB can help mitigate its effects;
 - Having *several* (but not just one) women on the panel can help too.
- Look for concrete evidence of achievement in academic references – don't just latch onto the superlatives!
- Be clear about the criteria in advance and stick to them. (Don't allow yourself to be overly influenced by confidence or an impressive persona at interview.)

What can we do?

Creating a better environment

We can all help to foster a better environment – not just for women, but for everyone.

- Call out peers and colleagues who behave inappropriately
- Have an explicit code of conduct for events (thanks, MCMP!) and a policy on seminar chairing
- Think about adopting a policy on staff-student relationships
- Ensure that staff and students know that harassment is taken seriously, and what to do if they suffer or witness it
- Are women PGs/postdocs/staff getting the advice and guidance they need? (Cf. THE book reviews)

What can we do?

What can students do?

- Talk about these issues with your peers!
You're the next generation of professional philosophers; the more new philosophers there are who are aware of the problems and potential solutions, the better things will get.
- If your department doesn't seem to be doing much, ask why not.
You could start with some concrete suggestions relevant to your own activities (e.g. concerning seminar conduct, teaching and assessment, etc.) and work your way up from there.

The general message ...

- Underrepresentation of women (and other minorities) is a bad thing, so we should try to change it.
- Broad institutional policies and procedures are good, but they aren't enough.
- We all need to think hard about what goes on at the local level, e.g.:
 - In the classroom, seminars and workshops, etc.
 - Local decision-making
 - Advice and support
- This is (to at least some extent!) **our** problem, so **we** need to figure out how to solve it.

References

- T. Schmader, J. Whitehead & V. H. Wysocki, "A linguistic analysis of letters of recommendation for male and female chemistry and biochemistry job applicants", *Sex Roles*, 57 (2007): 509-14.
- R. E. Steinpreis, K. A. Anders & D. Ritzke, "The impact of gender on the review of the curriculum vitae of job applicants and tenure applicants: a national empirical study", *Sex Roles*, 41 (1999): 509-28.

Further reading & resources

- J. T. Jost et al, "The existence of implicit bias is beyond reasonable doubt: a refutation of methodological and ideological objections and executive summary of ten studies that no manager should ignore", *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 29 (2009): 39-69.
- K. Hutchison & F. Jenkins (eds), *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?* Oxford: OUP (2013).
- Take an IAT yourself!
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- BPA/SWIP-UK Good Practice Scheme:
bpa.ac.uk/resources/women-in-philosophy/good-practice