Sexism in science is rife, says former President of the New Zealand Association of Scientists

In a new BWB Text, Dr Nicola Gaston reveals the reasons that women remain under-represented in the discipline of science.

Bypassing ill-judged T-shirts and distractingly sexy hashtags, Gaston jumps straight to the hard evidence that demonstrates the deep-rootedness of discrimination against female scientists.

'Science is sexist because we are sexist about science', states Gaston, citing studies that prove that societal assumptions about what women can or can't do when it comes to science continue to feed unconscious biases that influence course uptake, hiring decisions, publication outputs and success in funding rounds. Worryingly, Gaston demonstrates that these biases can in fact be most pronounced among those who consider themselves most objective.

Gaston is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Physical and Chemical Sciences at Victoria University of Wellington and for the past two years was President of the New Zealand Association of Scientists. She writes clearly and frankly of her exasperation at the pseudoscientific arguments of figures such as Larry Summers, former President of Harvard University, which imply that women might be biologically less suited to certain types of scientific work.

Gaston points out that the problem is instead that society still assumes that particular roles are more appropriate for men than for women – and that the stereotypes underpinning these assumptions urgently need dismantling. The cost of not doing so is high, says Gaston, not just for individual women, but for science and society more generally.

The career progression of women in science is a 'leaky pipeline', explains Gaston, losing female scientists at each stage as they confront unconscious biases and hidden hurdles not faced by men. This loss encompasses both human capital and the returns on taxpayers' financial investment in scientific training – one of the many reasons we need to think collectively about how to ensure gender equality in science.

Asserting that her 'purpose in talking and writing about sexism in science is to find answers, not to apportion blame', Gaston suggests what some of these answers could be. From formalising support structures for early career researchers to acknowledging unconscious bias when making hiring decisions, these suggestions are logical, practical – and scientific.

Measured, accessible, and engaging, Gaston's short book presents collective statistics alongside individual stories to shed fresh light on a hot topic.

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BRIDGET WILLIAMS BOOKS

Why Science is Sexist

Nicola Gaston

Science changes the world because the creation of knowledge opens up new pathways for us to explore new ways of doing things, and new questions to ask. My optimism lies in the fact that I think that the answer to why science is sexist does all of these things.

In this eye-opening BWB Text, Nicola Gaston, former President of the New Zealand Association of Scientists, reveals the ways in which the discipline of science is sexist. From the under-representation of women to the argument that mental capabilities are gendered, Gaston demonstrates the extent of our unconscious bias against female scientists, and warns of its damaging consequences for science and for society. In asking what can be done to combat this bias, she calls for us to rethink not just our attitudes towards gender, but also towards scientific knowledge and inquiry.

Author information

Dr Nicola Gaston is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Chemical and Physical Sciences at Victoria University of Wellington, Deputy Director of the MacDiarmid Institute for Advanced Materials and Nanotechnology, and until recently was President of the New Zealand Association of Scientists.



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Nicola Gaston is available for interview.

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