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Biologist relates experiences in career as both male, female

Transgendered scientist believes bias makes it hard for women to get to top in science

By SHANKAR VEDANTAM

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WASHINGTON - Neurobiologist Ben Barres has a unique perspective on former Harvard President Lawrence Summers' assertion that innate differences between the sexes might explain why many fewer women than men reach the highest echelons of science.

That's because Barres used to be a woman himself.

In a highly unusual critique, the Stanford University biologist — who used to be Barbara — said his experience as both a male and female had given him an intensely personal insight into the biases that make it harder for women to succeed in science.

After he underwent a sex change nine years ago at the age of 42, Barres recalled, another scientist who was unaware of it was heard to say, "Ben Barres gave a great seminar today, but then his work is much better than his sister's."

And as a female undergraduate at MIT, Barres once solved a difficult math problem that stumped many male classmates only to be told by a professor: "Your boyfriend must have solved it for you."

"By far," he wrote, "the main difference I have noticed is that people who don't know I am transgendered treat me with much more respect" than when he was a woman.

"I can even complete a whole sentence without being interrupted by a man."

Barres' salvo, bolstered with scientific studies, marks a dramatic twist in a controversy that began with Summers' suggestion last year that "intrinsic aptitude" may explain why there are relatively few tenured female scientists at Harvard.

After a lengthy feud with the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Summers resigned earlier this year.

The episode triggered a fierce fight between those who say talk of intrinsic differences reflects sexism that has held women back and those who argue that political correctness is keeping scientists from frankly discussing the issue.

While there are men and women on both sides of the argument, the debate has exposed fissures along gender lines, which is what makes Barres so unusual.

Barres said he has realized that many men are unconscious of the privileges that come with being male, which leaves them unable to countenance talk of glass ceilings and discrimination.

Barres' commentary was published in the journal Nature.

The scientist has also recently taken his argument to the highest reaches of American science, crusading to make access to prestigious awards more equitable.

Nancy Andreasen, a well-known psychiatrist at the University of Iowa, agreed with Barres.

When she stopped sending out research articles under her full name and used the initials N.C. Andreasen instead, she said, the acceptance rate of her publications soared.

Andreasen is one of the comparatively few women who have won the National Medal of Science.