

The Gender Illusion

By Elva Ainsworth

“Sure, women can ring as well as men, but we’re not the same; there’s a reason why we tend to ring round the front and the men ring the bigger bells. That’s ok, I don’t mind.”

It is now very clear from our data that, along with women’s disinclination to conduct and compose, this is indeed true – “we are not the same”, but, why is it so? And does it matter? This article summarises some of the latest research from psychology, evolutionary biology and neuroscience on the differences between the genders, and to discuss how these might apply to today’s world of ringing. Understanding of gender is complex and is still being fiercely debated so all I can do here is present a whistle-stop tour of some key points without time to fully substantiate many potentially controversial points. Nevertheless, by looking to understand where the real differences lie and exploring how these might impact women, we can still identify potential opportunities to encourage further participation.

We can all recognise the genders (most of the time). There are visible and substantial differences usually to be seen but we now know that gender is not a simple concept. Aside from the obvious physical factors, there seem to be four social dynamics that interact with each other to reinforce and partially cause the gender phenomenon:

- **Bias** – conscious and unconscious gender stereotyping is happening all the time by all of us, to all of us. If you want to see and feel the brutal reality of your own biases, try doing this Harvard test: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>. This bias is what has us think women leaders sound weak, why we assume that girls won’t want to try the tenor, why we accept that women don’t have to conduct and why we presume that women learners who drop out are simply not keen enough. We are all hard wired to respond in particular ways to certain categories and these responses are rooted deeply, outside of conscious logic.
- **Inferiority and Power** – women make up 50.1 % of the world’s population but only 20% of its leaders (United Nations 2010) – a phenomenon widespread across all nations and a historical and cultural one, deeply ingrained in most societies. Slow improvement is occurring over time but there is still a sense of inferiority which permeates many aspects of ringing and prevents women from asserting authority with as much ease as men.
- **Identity** – your gender is not simply an aspect of what you are but, more fundamentally, it is what you do, recurrently, in interaction with other people. It is the cage you and others put yourself within – whether you are “male”, “female” or any other gender-related identity. Your “cage” will feel real and be real even though it is, we believe, mostly created by social construct.
- **Expectations** – your identity and beliefs create a network of constraining expectations and interpersonal reactions that is a major cause of the ‘glass ceiling’ – the invisible, yet commonly

perceived, barrier that prevents women (and other minorities) from full advancement Our expectations influence whether we expect to be able to ring the tenor, whether we accept we “should” conduct touches and whether we might step up to be District Master.

These cultural factors conspire to keep the genders intact so there are a lot of powerful forces we have to contend with if we want anything to change. But surely there are some real differences that aren't simply invented? Having had my two boys after one girl I decided that boys had to be an entirely different species, so surely it can't be an illusion! Well, there have been years of fierce debate amongst social scientists and neuroscientists about what the real gender differences are and their causes. The nature/nurture debate is still ongoing with a clear understanding emerging that it is extremely difficult to detach the body from society. There are many visible clues that guide our differentiation between the genders but most of the obvious ones make no real difference to your ability to ring. Here are eight key areas of difference however that could impact women ringers, along with suggestions as to how to deal with the issue:

1. **Upper body strength** - this is a bell curve with an overlap between the genders showing that men tend to be stronger than women. Women show up as having only 50-60% of men's upper body strength on average. Strength does affect your ability to ring on the larger bells and when ringing up but it can normally be increased significantly with the right exercise and nutrition. **Solution:** women would benefit from training outside ringing, finessing the right technique and practising on bigger bells.
2. **Spatial skills** – men consistently outperform women on spatial tasks, including mental rotation ie the ability to identify how a 3-D object would appear if rotated in space. This is considered to be due to differences in the parietal lobe which may mean that the physics of the bell are more easily understood by men. **Solution:** make sure to take time to explain and demonstrate the mechanics of bell-handling.
3. **Self-confidence** – there is a confidence gap with self-confidence lower for girls and women than for men. This links with a number of cultural forces - the desirability of feminine modesty coupled with the reality of living with disempowering norms. **Solution:** share female success stories, encourage women to come forward and to “lean in” by making it safe to try something new.
4. **Stamina** – men are more likely to suffer fatal illnesses whereas women live longer but experience more chronic illness - a trend that aligns with the surprising observation of recent studies that women have more stamina and greater muscle endurance. **Solution:** ask women in peals - don't assume smaller physicality means weaker.
5. **Brain differences** – despite years of research trying to find gender differences in brains, there is very little to show for it. It seems though that all the sex hormones affect the brain in a variety of different ways at different stages in both genders. The result is complex and inconsistent. **Solution:** if you want to improve your focus or your resilience or your ability to deal with emotions then work on these areas and get support; blaming your gender will not move you forward.
6. **Intellect** - there is a significantly larger spread of male “intelligence” than for female although most of this is at the lower end of developmental disorders. There is some (heavily

debated) evidence that there is a small but significant difference at the top end too. (However this top gap is not enough to account for the gaps between men and women taking up maths and science or the paucity of female science professors). **Solution:** believe that anything is possible and practise using your brainpower with method learning, composing and conducting. Use of your brain will develop it further.

7. **Leadership style** – both genders can be highly effective leaders in a business environment where men show up as more driven, strategic and commercial while women show up better [MW2] at collaboration, communication and management. This is entwined with the cultural norms so is also tricky to change. **Solution:** use the people strengths in your band; women should look to develop their own authentic style that balances the job with the people.
8. **Role in child-bearing and family life** – women are still doing more work for the family and the home than men as well as having the obvious pregnancy and breast-feeding issues. **Solution:** pay close attention to flexibility and inclusion of distracted parents.

On first look you might consider all these differences as firmly rooted in biology but each one of these areas can be influenced by the social and cultural environment. This is where identity and expectation form reality. Rather surprisingly therefore this complex and intertwined interplay between the environment and genetics means that the body is, in part, a socially formed entity. It appears therefore that the gender differences are being exaggerated and reinforced by our cultural norms. There is evidence of ancient societies where the genders have worked very differently which backs up this theory. This means that the way our genders relate to each other does not have to be the way it has been. It could be quite different.

Hormones are now understood to be impacted by your behaviour and the environment as well as your biology. Brains are now known to have a high level of neuroplasticity – an extraordinary ability to change and reorganise itself by forming new connections. What we expect to do and what we actually do with our brains and our bodies makes a big difference. Our self-esteem can shift depending on how much encouragement and positive reinforcement we receive – exposing someone to a disempowering stereotype impairs their performance. Our roles in family life can take a different shape if there is intention and our community, work and relations will allow them. Practising skills improves them and exercising muscles strengthens them. Our hormones are impacted by the demands made of us and on others around us. Society produces biological changes. What might seem fixed is rather fluid.

This is an issue that affects every woman personally yet isn't about any one individual. We believe that this is an issue deep seated in the cultural roots of our social past and also one that is fed largely by the unconscious; one woman's accomplishments alone are worth acknowledging but it will never be enough. Fresh conversations, new thinking, new processes and new initiatives can make a difference though, especially when they are designed to either prevent accidental disempowerment of women or to deliberately bring them forward.

Summary

To conclude, there are indeed gender differences but there is much more similarity than difference and the differences as they relate to ringing can be, to a large extent, overcome. From an individual perspective, there is nothing which should constrain or limit what is possible in ringing. We can all, in effect, be feminine and we can all be masculine.

The participation of women in ringing is vital to the sustainability of our hobby and women can contribute more. So, how can we encourage women further? Here are a few ideas to get us started:

1. We need to create settings that promote interactions high on social affiliation and “warm regard” and less on ego and machoism. If we create a sense of solidarity and friendship, foster rapport and respect then we will create warmth for women to thrive.
2. To be sure we are inclusive of all levels of confidence and style, we could use democratic rules of unanimous voting rather than majority basis which can inadvertently create a social identity of a minority. Ensuring that everyone is heard and everyone’s views are taken into consideration generally improves decision-making.
3. Enforce a fully inclusive speaking process in formal meetings and practices rather than leaving it up to the loudest and most confident, and monitor speaking times to ensure balance in how much is said and by whom.
4. Develop a female mentoring and support programme in areas of conducting, ringing round the back, leading and composing.
5. Deliberately bring women’s issues to the agenda for discussion and action at tower, district, association and Central Council levels.
6. Actively invite women to take on responsibilities and new challenges – make it safe for risks to be taken; consider role-sharing.
7. Consider creating a more collaborative and social, less competitive youth initiative to run in parallel with the Youth Contest.
8. Review rules of engagement on Facebook groups to ensure empowering and supportive behaviours.

This isn’t just a question of needing to do the “right” thing morally. Diversity itself is healthy. The more women are represented, the more democratic the society is, which then leads to an improvement in the quality of decision-making. The more women in senior roles in corporations, the better the business performance. The more inclusive a culture, the more engagement. More, fully active women ringers would improve the exercise in a number of different and useful ways so I invite everyone to consider that gender differences are not as real as you may think. Let’s all open the cages a little.

Further Reading if you are interested:

G Rippon 2019 "The Gendered Brain. The new neuroscience that shatters the myth of the female brain"

C Fine 2010 "Delusions of Gender. The real science behind sex differences"

A Saini 2018 "Inferior: the true power of women and the science that shows it"