

# Female Primatologists Confer—Without Men

*A recent meeting on evolution that was closed to male scientists stirs debate on discrimination and the role of gender in research*

**Santa Cruz, California**—ARE MEN QUALIFIED to discuss menopause in a scientific context? That question was raised last month by a conference held at the University of California at Santa Cruz. The subject of the conference was female biology, and the troubling question about men came up not because it was on the formal agenda—but because the meeting was closed to male researchers.

The theme of the conference, entitled "Women Scientists Look at Evolution: Female Biology and Life History," was the strategies of females in evolution. The topics discussed, drawn from studies of human societies and primate groups, included such things as menopause, sex and gender roles, calcium loss, and economic influences on the position of women.

Two of the main organizers of the conference—Adrienne Zihlman of UCSC and Mary Ellen Morbeck of the University of Arizona—insist female scientists speak more freely on such topics when males aren't around. What is more, they add, women scientists think differently about those topics than men do—possibly even understanding them better because they are women. These claims leave male primatologists fuming and sputtering. Says primatologist Irwin Bernstein of the University of Georgia: "I'm just appalled that you can hold a scientific conference these days and discriminate on the basis of gender."

Zihlman and Morbeck, both physical anthropologists, say they didn't set out to exclude men when they began putting the conference together. But when they first drew up a list of potential participants, it just happened to consist entirely of women. The next step was simply deciding not to

add any token males to give some semblance of balance.

Having arrived by accident at an all-female conference, the organizers rationalized the exclusion of men. Zihlman, for example, says, "Here I am a veteran of the field. And yet I feel uncomfortable [at most meetings]. How do younger, less experienced women feel?"

Zihlman and Morbeck also say that male posturing and filibustering slow conferences down. Without them, they say, exceptional progress was made. Glows Morbeck: "At the end of the first day, we were where we'd be after 3 days of other conferences. At the end of 2½ days we were miles ahead."

And some meeting participants concur. According to physical anthropologist Silvana Borgognini Tarli of the University of

Pisa, "The atmosphere was almost perfect, the sort of atmosphere that should be present at all conferences, which are, after all, for communication. No one was searching in others' work for feeble points to attack. We had discussion without victory or defeat." Tarli's only wish, she says, is that her male colleagues could have been there to watch.

But that's exactly what couldn't happen because of the no-men policy. And the policy of keeping men out doesn't make sense to some male scientists.

Frans de Waal, a pathbreaking primatologist from the University of Wisconsin, believes "the time is long past when female primatologists need to have all-female meetings. These women are all very strong, independent people. . . . I know about the research that shows that women in the presence of men don't express themselves, that they listen more than they talk, which may be true. But that research was not done on female primatologists."

The doubters aren't all male, either. Joyce E. Sirianni of the State University of New York at Buffalo, president of the American Society of Primatologists (who wasn't invited to the relatively small conference), says she can't imagine established researchers in

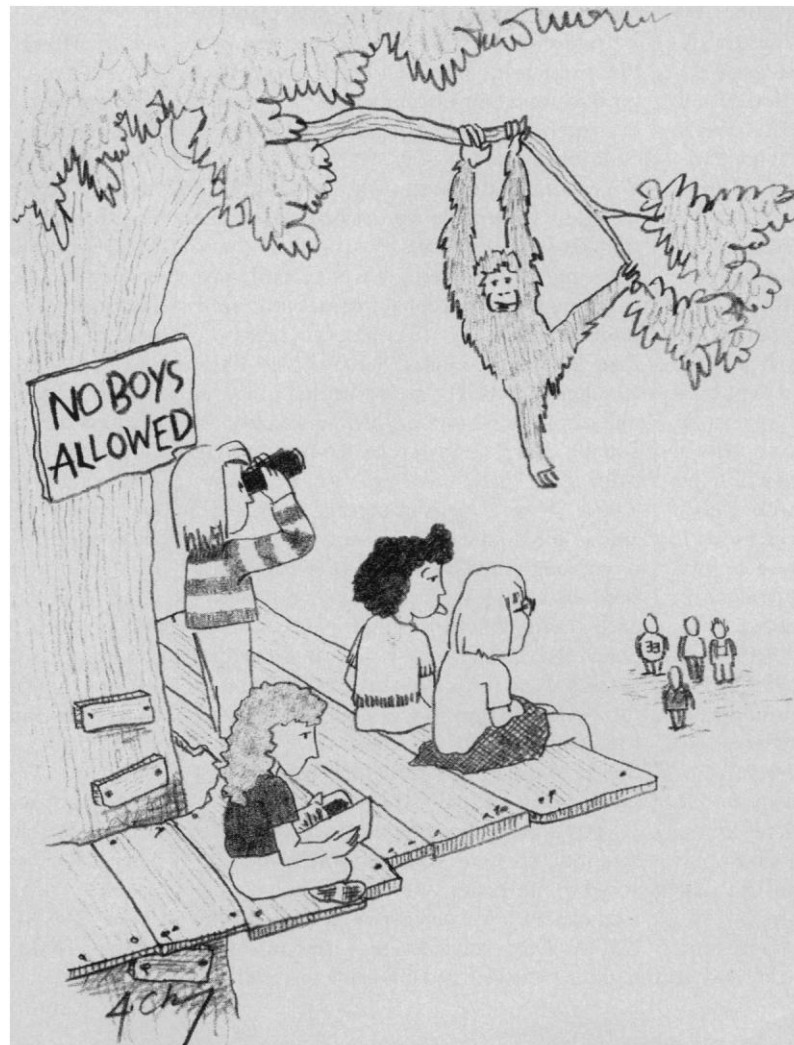
her field being intimidated by men, although, she concedes, some younger women might need "mothering."

Furthermore, says Sirianni, keeping men out raises another unsettling possibility: that research by men was also barred. "Did they exclude male research? That would be terribly dangerous."

That's the question that troubles some of the barred male primatologists the most. "To deliberately exclude half of the scientists in the field is to lose half the work in the field," says Georgia's Bernstein.

In fact, however, although men might not have been present, their work was, conference participants say: research by men was freely discussed.

But even if the discussions had focused largely on work by women, that might have been justified in the eyes of some participants. Their claim is that research done by women on females (of our species and others) is



qualitatively different from research done by men. Pisa's Tarli is an example of those who hold that point of view: "It was necessary that the participants be all female since [the conference] had to do with female life history strategies. Males cannot find out what is important in female reproduction. They've never experienced it. How can they judge, value, or label things they have never experienced themselves?"

Bernstein responds with heat: "I reject the premise totally that women can understand females better than men can. I don't believe the scientific quality of one's work is influenced by age, sex, religion, ethnic origin, or whatever."

Sirianni takes something of a middle position in this part of the debate: "We all develop our own metaphor. Each sex, each generation, each culture develops its own metaphor for explaining evolution, each with a different bias. And we all have a bias. But there has to be a balance."

One irony of this controversy, de Waal notes, is that it takes place in a scientific field that is among the least dominated by males. About 35% of the members of the American Society of Primatologists are women.

What is more, according to Bernstein, women's participation in the field began as early as the 1920s. And, after beginning by being fairly male-centered, studies of primate groups have now become increasingly focused on the interactions that take place between females in the group as well as the interactions that occur between females and their offspring.

Even those changes, however, are subject to sharply different interpretations. Zihlman and others say an increase in women in the field is one reason for the female orientation in primate studies. But De Waal doubts that the entrance of women primatologists into the field is responsible for the change. He notes that the first long-term studies of female kinship among primates (the ones, in fact, that inspired much of the current emphasis on female primates) were done in the 1950s by male researchers—and by some very sexist ones at that.

Such wide differences of opinion suggest that the debate over the role of females in primatology—both as topics for study and as research workers—is bound to continue for quite a long time. And whether there are any more sex-segregated scientific conferences or not, men will no doubt be included in the debate in some form. As SUNY's Sirianni says: "When the subject is science, everyone should be talking."

■ JENNIE DUSHECK

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## Will AIDS Conference Migrate?

The 1992 International Conference on AIDS is scheduled to be held in Boston. But will it actually be held there? Maybe. And then again, maybe not. The two organizations sponsoring the megaconference have said they will pull out on 1 November unless there is a change in U.S. immigration policy, which currently prohibits people infected with HIV from entering the United States. And although such a change is possible through legislative maneuvering, it may not come in time—with the result that the conference could deport itself to, say, Sydney, Australia.

In 1987, legislation sponsored by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) added HIV infection to the Public Health Service list of "dangerous contagious diseases." Having a condition on that list is sufficient to bar travelers and immigrants from the United States. Infection with the AIDS virus is unique in the sense that it is the only disease on the list that was put there by Congress. The others (including active tuberculosis and gonorrhea) were added by the Public Health Service itself.

A remarkably broad coalition of scientific, political, and activist groups believes the restrictive immigration policy is misguided, because HIV is not casually transmitted. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has said "HIV infection in the short-term traveler to the U.S. poses no risk to the public health." The National Commission on AIDS criticized the current law as "counterproductive, discriminatory, and a waste of current resources." Others who have called for its repeal include the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, the International Red Cross, and the American Public Health Association, in addition to numerous AIDS activists.

In spite of this diverse opposition, Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis H. Sullivan has refused to act. As ultimate boss of the Public Health Service, Sullivan generally has final say over the contagious disease list. But in this case he has stood firm, invoking the Bush Administration position that he can't defy the will of Congress.

That prompted Representative J. Roy Rowland (D-GA), an M.D. and a member of the AIDS Commission, to introduce a bill last April that would require Sullivan to review and revise the list and give him authorization to make the final choice about what's on it and what's not. Rowland's bill, cosponsored by Henry Waxman (D-CA), is currently languishing in Waxman's subcommittee on health and the environment. If it doesn't emerge by the time Congress adjourns on 1 November, it will die. And that's why the sponsors of the AIDS conference—Harvard's AIDS Institute and the International AIDS Society—set the November deadline.

With that deadline rapidly approaching, the moving spirits behind the conference are starting to consider other options. "I would say the situation is grim," says Alan Fein, director of the AIDS Institute at Harvard. "It's an issue that [members of Congress] are reluctant to vote on before an election." Fein adds that London and Sydney are possible alternative sites but stresses that "it's awfully late to begin planning for one of these conferences."

What would be lost if the conference moved? Well, the AIDS Institute would lose \$100,000, for starters. Boston would lose the "1-week crash course on AIDS education" that Fein promised as a by-product of the conference. Attendance at the conference, the most significant AIDS meeting of the year, might be considerably smaller if it were held in Sydney. And the medical community's perception of U.S. AIDS policy certainly would not be improved. In spite of the special 10-day visas offered by the Bush Administration to people infected with HIV for the AIDS conference this summer in San Francisco, more than 100 medical organizations and many researchers boycotted the conference.

The only trick left in the political bag that might save the Boston conference comes from Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA). Kennedy plans to attach a measure similar to Rowland's to an immigration reform bill. But several things must fall into place for that to happen. Kennedy plans to introduce his amendment in conference committee, which can happen only if the immigration bill passes both the House and the Senate. That's a lot of ifs. And as Harvard's Fein notes: "Time is running out."

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