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## Women in mathematics in Australia

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### Abstract

Many people believe women cannot "do" mathematics. This is not true, Tables 1, 2 and 3 show us that some women are quite good at mathematics. Also Table 1 which shows Honours degrees, clearly indicates that in recent years the percentage of women obtaining Honours degrees has steadily increased. I attribute this increase to the consciousness raising due to changing community attitudes to women. It is no longer unfashionable for women to obtain a mathematical education with a view to having a career.

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WOMEN IN MATHEMATICS IN AUSTRALIA

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N.S.W. 2006 Australia.

Many people believe women cannot "do" mathematics. This is not true, Tables 1, 2 and 3 show us that some women are quite good at mathematics. Also Table 1 which shows Honours degrees, clearly indicates that in recent years the percentage of women obtaining Honours degrees has steadily increased. I attribute this increase to the consciousness raising due to changing community attitudes to women. It is no longer unfashionable for women to obtain a mathematical education with a view to having a career.

The data in Tables 2 and 3 is not up-to-date. It can be interpreted as indicating the "fear of success syndrome" in women. This syndrome is supposed to have been caused by women fearing they will be less marriageable or become intellectual freaks if they are clever and highly educated. It can also be viewed as reflecting the discrimination against women in

obtaining scholarships to study for higher degrees and the commonly held view that it is much more difficult for a woman to obtain a tenured academic position.

When we consider the number of women obtaining Honours degrees and how few obtain Ph.D.'s we must ask "Are Honours degrees a good indication of research potential?" If the answer is yes then, we must ask "Why are we not obtaining women Ph.D.'s?" If the answer is no then we must ask "What is wrong with our system of awarding Honours?"

Honours Degrees (the number in brackets are First Class Honours)

Year	1976	1975	1974	1973	1972	1971	1970	1969	1968
Men	114(51)	120(55)	141(46)	134(51)	127	142	103	127	127
Women	27(10)	26(15)	42(21)	26(7)	21	35	12	16	7
Total	141(61)	146(70)	183(67)	160(58)	148	177	115	143	134
% Women in total	19.1(16.4)	17.8(21.4)	23.0(31.3)	16.3(12.1)	14.2	19.8	10.4	11.2	5.2

Table 1.

Of 121 women in 1973-76 who obtained Honours Degrees 48 or 39.7% obtained Honours Class I. (The comparable numbers for men are 509, 203, 39.9%)

1967	1966	1965	1959-64	Total
101	94	77	283	1690
15	16	13	33	289
116	110	90	316	1979
12.9	14.5	14.4	10.4	14.6

### Masters Degrees

Year	1974	1973	1972	1959-71	Total
Men	18	15	23	237	293
Women	4	3	2	34	43
Total	22	18	25	271	336
% Women in Total	18.2	16.7	8.0	12.5	12.8

Table 2

### Ph.D. Degrees

Year	1974	1973	1972	1959-71	Total
Men	38	44	28	225	335
Women	4	1	5	10	20
Total	42	45	33	235	355
% Women in Total	9.5	2.2	15.2	4.3	5.6

Table 3

### Total Higher Degrees

Year	1974	1973	1972	1959-71	Total
Men	56	59	51	462	628
Women	8	4	7	44	63
Total	64	63	58	506	691
% Women in Total	12.5	6.3	12.1	8.7	9.1

Table 4

Many (male) mathematicians have observed that female students tend to sit at the front of the class, diligently take copious notes and then learn them parrot fashion. They say the women display relatively little initiative or creativity. In other words they feel that if a woman acts

in a socially acceptable feminine way it proves she has no innate ability.

My view is that young women spend so much time and psychic energy submerging their natural selves in order to appear acceptable and feminine (and not a threat to their male teachers) they suppress their innate creativity.

#### *The woman example*

Time and time again in social contexts I have met primary school teachers who admit they cannot "do decimals", "do percentages" or "do fractions". As so much of a primary school teacher's time is involved teaching fundamental, basic, *important* mathematics this is frightening.

It appears that it is women who do not like mathematics who choose to become primary school teachers. During teacher training these women study a course in Mathematics Method but it is assumed they actually know primary school mathematics.

I believe many peoples difficulties with mathematics stem from primary school and perhaps from teachers who did not like or understand their subject matter. These people go on to become primary school teachers and the cycle is repeated.

So the example in the community at large is of women

not being at ease with mathematics. It is not counteracted in high school, few women are Subject Masters, nor in University, in Australia there are no women Professors of Mathematics.

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