

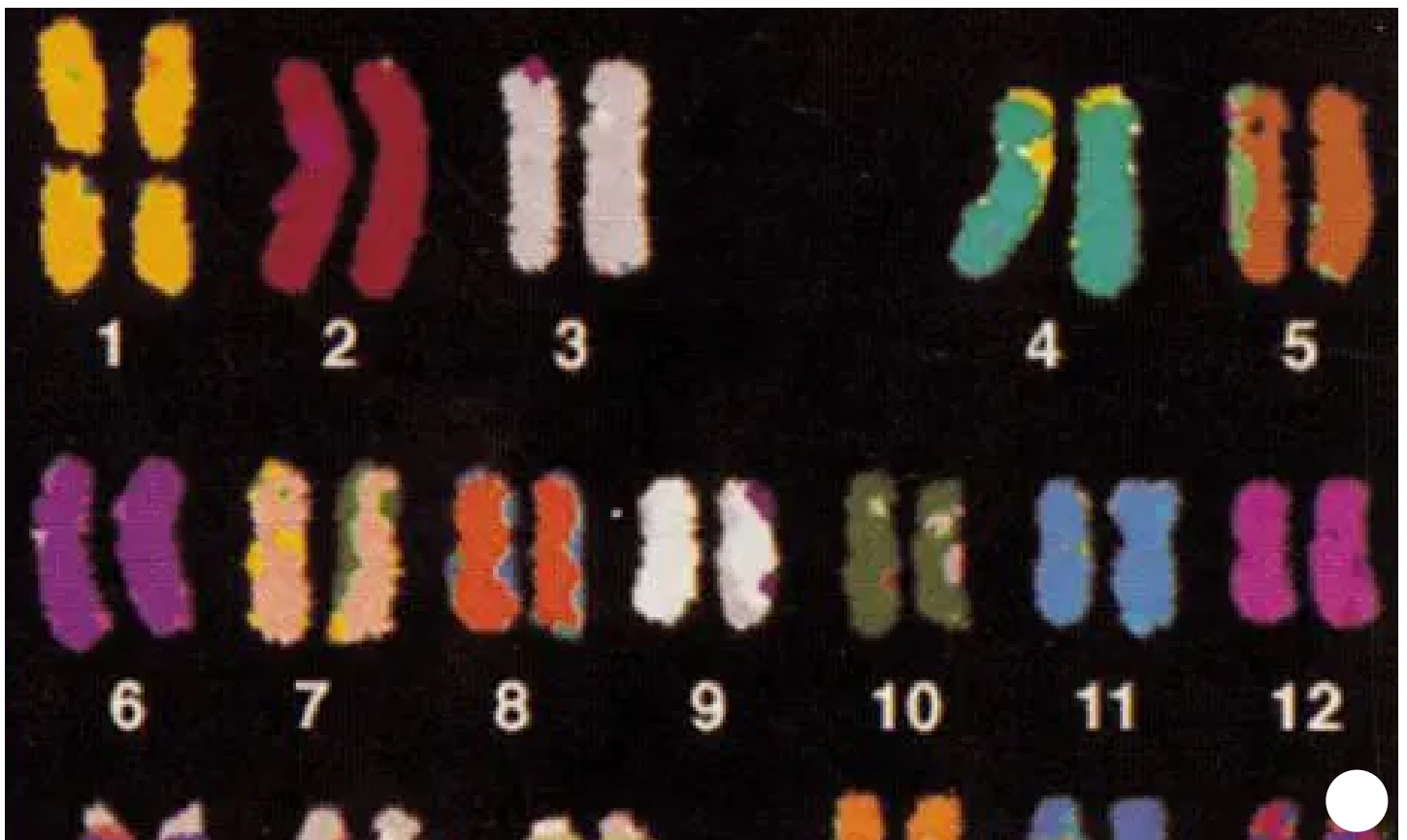
# The Guardian

It's not sexist to accept that biology affects behaviour

*Simon Baron-Cohen*

Biological determinism has been attacked for underpinning gender stereotypes but this is to misunderstand our work

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**N**atasha Walter suggests women are invisible in public life because of "boxing them up into tired old stereotypes" and because of a "resurgence of biological determinism". I totally agree we need to sweep away the tired old stereotypes and think imaginatively about how to work towards a more equal society for men and women.

However, I don't think biological determinist theories have much to do with this issue, and rejecting biological determinism makes no sense. We don't want to revert to the 1960s view that human behaviour is purely culturally determined, since we now know that view was profoundly mistaken. No one disputes that culture is important in explaining sex differences, but it can't be the whole story.

Men and women don't just differ in terms of their genitalia, but in other important ways. For example, there are more than 1,000 genes on the X chromosome. Since women have two X

chromosomes but men only have one, this genetic difference has an impact. Genes on the X chromosome are responsible for why 1 in 20 men but only 1 in 400 women have red-green colour blindness. Genes on the X chromosome are also responsible for why 1 in 5,000 men, but hardly any women, have haemophilia type A. Science continues apace to unravel the functions of genes. Just last year our group published new findings of genes related to empathy - a skill that women are, on average, better at than men.

Biological determinists don't dismiss the importance of culture. They simply don't deny the role of biology. It is a moderate position, recognising the interaction of social and biological factors. Nor, in my opinion, is biological determinism necessarily sexist. It can be sexist, if it is used to claim that all women do X and all men do Y (since sex differences don't apply to all individuals of one sex) or if it is used to perpetuate social inequalities. Such sexist applications of biological determinist theories are abhorrent.

In our research, we use biological determinist theories in more nuanced ways. We find, for example, that it is your brain type, not your sex, which predicts how you will behave. Some brain types are more common in one sex than another, but because an individual can be atypical for their sex, it is meaningless to try to predict anything about a person's behavior based on their sex. A brain type that leans towards strong "systemising", for example, is more common in males, but there are plenty of men who don't have this profile, and quite a lot of females who do. Systemising happens when you try to figure out how things work, be it a computer program, a car engine, or a maths equation. We don't yet know if strong systemising is associated with particular sex-linked genes, but we should keep an open mind on this possibility, given that only 10% of professors of mathematics are female.

But back to Walter's plea for more women in public life: I strongly echo her call. There is plenty we can do to make public life both more attractive and more accessible to women, including making prime ministerial debates less like a boxing fight, general elections less like tribal warfare, and the House of Commons working practices more family-friendly. None of this is likely to have anything to do with biological determinism.

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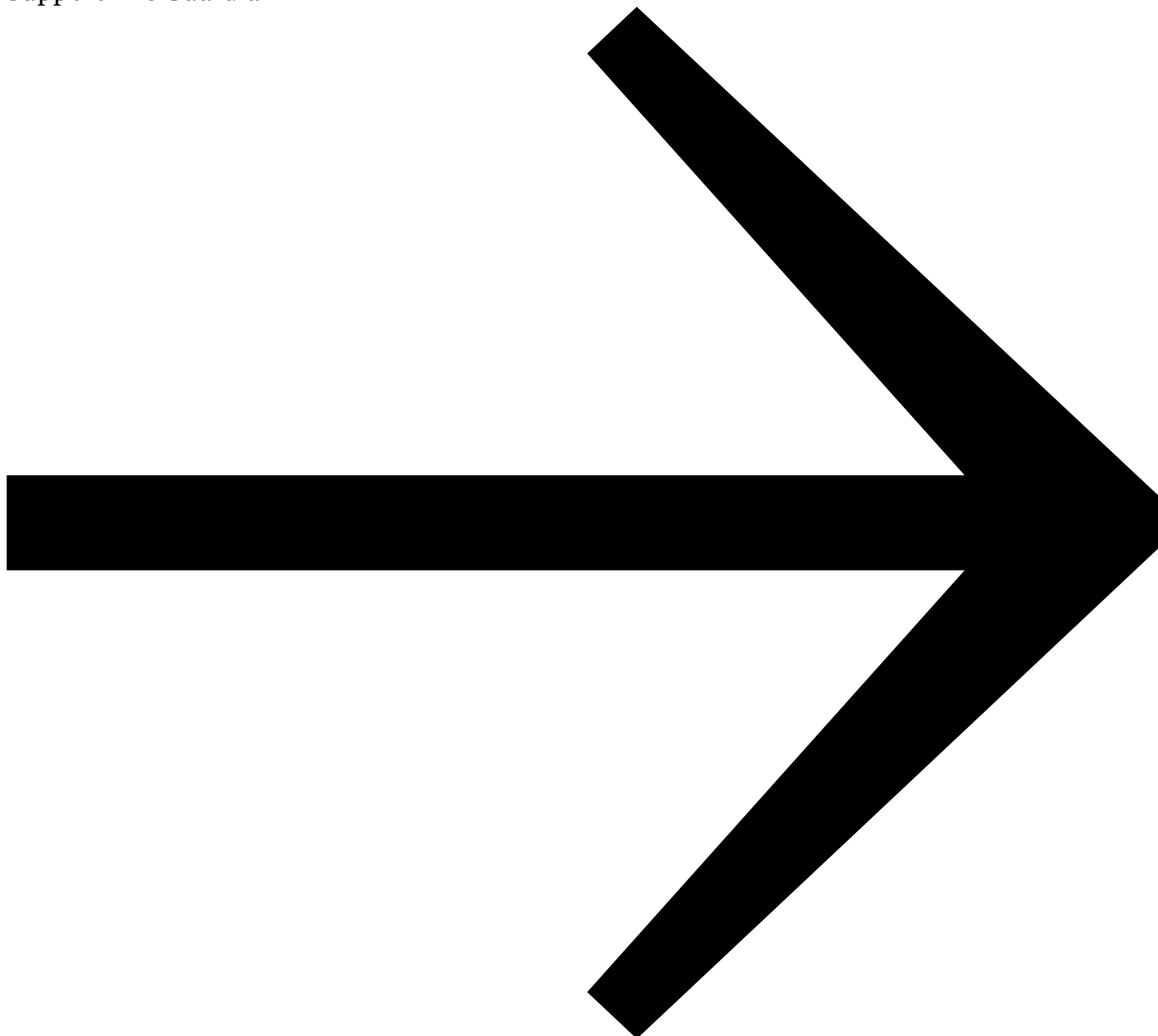
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